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NEVER STOP WORKING:
EXAMINING THE LIFE AND ACTIVISM OF HOWARD FULLER

by
Sarah Barber

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Degree of

Master of Science
in Urban Studies

at
The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
August 2012

ABSTRACT
NEVER STOP WORKING:
EXAMINING THE LIFE AND ACTIVISM OF HOWARD FULLER

by

Sarah Barber

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2012
Under the Supervision of Professor Amanda I. Seligman

Howard Fuller, a long-time community activist born in Shreveport, Louisiana and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has become a nationally renowned advocate for school choice. Coming from humble beginnings, Fuller learned from his tight-knit community growing up that he could be anything he wanted to be if he worked hard enough and focused on his education. Wanting future generations of black Americans to have the same opportunities he had, Fuller would dedicate his life work to uplifting his people through education. How Fuller approached that work, however, led to seemingly contradicting approaches and ideas. This thesis attempts to make sense of Howard Fuller's life and activism, and explain how his choices and activism evolved over time. From fighting for integrating schools in Cleveland, Ohio, to opening an all-black university in Durham, North Carolina, to becoming superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, Howard Fuller has shifted his tactics on how to provide low-income blacks with quality educational opportunities. All of Fuller's work has led him to now, fighting for school choice as a way to give low-income blacks a chance to earn the best education possible. At seventy-one years old Howard Fuller is still fighting, and still working to uplift his race and improve their life chances. Howard Fuller is a dedicated race man, and this thesis is his story.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The dominant narrative of the Civil Rights struggle in the United States has been told primarily through the lens of the South. In the twenty-first century, historians are attempting to complicate that narrative, doing extensive research about the movement in the North and West and making comparisons to the southern version. These historians are exploring the idea that the Northern movement was not a result of, or in response to, the activism that was taking place in the South, but its own movement that started well before the well-documented struggles of the 1960s.¹ In his recent synthesis of the northern movement, Thomas Sugrue explains “our histories—and our collective memories—of the civil rights era do not reflect the national scope of racial inequality and the breadth of challenges to it...Most histories focus on the South and the epic battles between nonviolent protestors and the defenders of Jim Crow during the 1950s and 1960s.”² The movement in the North is not a story of one single struggle, or one approach, to facilitate change. The formerly prevalent interpretation was that non-violent direct action through the mid-1960s led to inaction and slow change, which led to an abandonment of that approach. This interpretation overlooks many important aspects and viewpoints of leaders in the struggle. The fight for equal opportunity in education was part of this battle, with the Supreme Court deciding in the *Brown v. Board of Education*³ case in 1954 that separate school accommodations were inherently unequal, deeming them

¹ See Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2009); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jerald Podair, *The Strike that Changed New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); and *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003),

² Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, xi.

³ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), United States Reports.

unconstitutional. Because schools in the North were not directly in the scope of the *Brown* decision, the future of schools in the North and the direction they should take to obtain equal opportunity was up in the air.

The question of how to approach Northern schools was not answered in unison by any faction of the communities involved in those schools. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, school reform leaders had to interpret the *Brown* decision to facilitate change in their public school district, and different leaders sought different approaches to these changes based on their own life experiences. As historian Jack Dougherty said in discussing Milwaukee's reform activists, "the *Brown* decision—touched all of their lives, but activists from various generations interpreted its meaning in different ways as they encountered changing forms of racism over time."⁴ Howard Fuller, who migrated to Milwaukee from Shreveport, Louisiana as a boy in 1948, has been an integral reformer of Milwaukee Public Schools, and exemplifies the evolving approaches one man can have towards reforming urban education in order to advance his race. Fuller's varied approaches to advancing his race through educational opportunities must be examined and explained to show how one man could have taken such different approaches to change in one lifetime.

Martha Biondi's work *To Stand and Fight: the Struggle for Civil Rights in New York City*, demonstrated that it is more helpful when discussing the Civil Rights movement to talk about the North and South simultaneously rather than the former being a result of the latter. She explained that discriminatory practices in New York City (in employment, housing, schools, and politics) all required race-conscious remedies that

⁴ Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 5.

shifted over time.⁵ She also emphasized the point that all black activists during the movement did not think alike. From blacks on the communist left to those unwilling to identify with such a political ideology, Biondi showed the complications of the Civil Rights movement. Howard Fuller's life encompasses these complex approaches and shows that the Civil Rights movement not only varied between regions or groups, but within one man over the course of his career.

When Howard Fuller moved to Cleveland, Ohio to attend Western Reserve University in 1962, he became involved in the city's school integration movement. As president of the student senate in the school of social work, Fuller was involved in organizing students to protest the building of a school in a predominantly black neighborhood on the basis that the student body would also be black. At this point in his life, Fuller believed getting black students into classrooms with white students was the key to providing them access to resources that were disproportionately being given to white schools with white students. He also believed in the power of non-violence.⁶ When Fuller moved to Durham, North Carolina in 1964, he took a job with Operation Breakthrough, a local office of the national War on Poverty Program, which was focused on community action.⁷ In Durham, Fuller worked with families as well as within schools. He saw black schools closing and their students being sent to white schools, and saw that in these integrated schools, black students were disproportionately being taught in

⁵ Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: the Struggle for Civil Rights in New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁶ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty (transcript), in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, p 3.

⁷ Clipping, Tom Bamberger, "The Education of Howard Fuller," *Milwaukee Magazine*, July 1988, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

special, separate classes.⁸ Seeing the resistance to equal opportunity in education in integrated settings in traditional public schools as well as university settings, Fuller began to see separate education for blacks, controlled by blacks, as a better way to create opportunity.

Fuller opened and taught in an all-black university in Durham, North Carolina in 1969 and ran the university until it closed until 1973.⁹ He returned to Milwaukee and soon became involved in a fight to keep one traditionally black neighborhood school available to its neighborhood students, North Division High School: his own alma mater. This change was the result of a court-ordered desegregation plan in Milwaukee that would force neighborhood students to be bused out so that white students could be bused in to obtain certain court-mandated levels of integration. This began a long stretch of Fuller's activism in Milwaukee, which would lead to a fight to create an all-black school district, a demand for more accountability in the public schools, and eventually the expansion of school choice options for parents whose public schools were clearly not serving them.

Fuller is an important person to examine these approaches through because he was not only involved in these fights; he was leading them. From heading the Coalition to Save North Division to being appointed the Superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, to an eventual chairpersonship of a national group advocating for School Choice, Fuller put himself at the forefront of every battle he saw being fought to provide educational opportunities to low-income blacks. While his activism in later years involved different strategies for racial advancement than his activism in early years, following Fuller's life

⁸ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 9.

⁹ Bamberger, "The Education of Howard Fuller."

from Milwaukee to Cleveland to Durham and back again show that these varying approaches had a constant theme: advancing his race.

According to historian Jonathon Coleman, writing about race relations in the United States in the early 1990s through the lens of Milwaukee, one unfortunate stereotype about black people is that “*All black people think alike.*”¹⁰ In his analysis of Milwaukee, Coleman shows that this not true and has not been true since the beginning of black political activism. Fuller, a visible man in Milwaukee’s black community since the 1970s, drew both criticism and acclaim for his approaches to reform and efforts to improve the lives of low-income blacks among other politically active blacks. One Fuller adversary in Milwaukee was a militant alderman named Michael McGee, who started and led the Black Panther Militia chapter in the city. Fuller, who had built coalitions and collaborated with people during his adult life, transcended racial divides when building alliances. According to Coleman, “the path Fuller had chosen—to essentially work within the mainstream—had elicited comments of ‘lackey’ and ‘hypocrite’ from McGee.”¹¹ This was reinforced when Fuller was appointed Superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, and the Greater Milwaukee Committee (a powerful group of white business leaders and politicians in Milwaukee) “pronounced Fuller to be someone it could work with.” According to Coleman, this was “the moment many in the black community became suspicious and wary of him. If the powers that be anoint you, the paranoid thinking went, who’s to say you’re going to represent the best interests of black people? What kind of ‘compromises’ have you made to become someone whites approve of and can work

¹⁰ Jonathan Coleman, *Long Way to Go: Black and White in America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), 37, emphasis in original.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

with?”¹² This fed the idea that Fuller may be a “puppet for the white establishment,”¹³ which inhibited the racial solidarity Fuller sought in reforming the Milwaukee Public Schools. His appointment frustrated other influential black Milwaukeeans. Jerrel Jones, owner of WNOV, a black radio station in Milwaukee told Jonathan Coleman he was disgusted with the appointment because it seemed that “whenever the city ‘needs a nigger for something, they choose Howie.’”¹⁴ The divisive attitudes of activists in Milwaukee hindered change and created battles between leaders who, at the core, wanted to improve the situation for blacks in Milwaukee. This thesis will argue that Fuller’s approaches, although drawing criticism from other black activists in the city, simply evolved to fit the specific contexts he was fighting within.

Coleman’s analysis of both Fuller and his critics shows that Fuller’s life was full of “radical and revolutionary” activism, combined with instances of collaboration and coalition building.¹⁵ These changing approaches happened because of Fuller’s status as a race man. Fuller, when explaining his self-identity as a race man, said that, “I think that I do have a responsibility to be trying to help those of us [blacks within the community] who reach out, that I have a direct responsibility to do that.”¹⁶ Sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton developed the term “race man” in their 1945 ethnographic study *Black Metropolis*. They discussed the development of the race man in the context of the “Midwest Metropolis,” citing that in these situations blacks lived “in a state of

¹² Ibid., 190.

¹³ Ibid., 375.

¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., 38.

¹⁶ Howard Fuller at Commando meeting (transcript), August 17 1991, in *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 2, tape 30, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

intense and perpetual awareness that they are a black minority in a white man's world."¹⁷ They explained that because America rejected them, but they did not want to reject themselves, blacks tended to "fluctuate between shame and defiance."¹⁸ In the 1920s and 1930s, this race consciousness developed into race pride with black leaders "perpetually involved in an effort to make race pride more than an end in itself: to utilize it as a morale builder, as the raw material of 'racial solidarity.'"¹⁹ The personification of this effort led to the development of the race man. Sociologist Elijah Anderson expanded upon this definition in his essay "The Precarious Balance: Race Man or Sellout?" saying a race man was "a particular kind of black leader who lived in a segregated society and felt strongly responsible to the black race, especially in front of whites or outsiders to the community. Often, he felt as though he carried the whole weight of the race on his shoulders, and in public had the need to put matters of race first. Such a person was intent on 'advancing the race' by working as a role model, both to uplift the ghetto community and to disabuse the wider society of its often negative view of blacks."²⁰ Within this definition it becomes clear that Howard Fuller's identity as a race man is not only accurate, but also helpful in understanding his approaches to advancing his race over time.

The focus on race in this project, how being black shaped Howard Fuller, how racism continuously oppressed those he set out to advance with his activism, and how focusing on race would lead Fuller to build coalitions with people outside of his race

¹⁷ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), 390.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 391.

²⁰ Elijah Anderson, "The Precarious Balance: Race Man or Sellout?" in *The Darden Dilemma*, ed. Ellis Cose (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 116.

while drawing criticism from individuals within it is explored through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, the editors of *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, and authors of *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, wrote that after “the civil rights movement of the 1960s had stalled, and indeed that many of its gains were being rolled back. New approaches were needed to understand and come to grips with the more subtle, but just as deeply entrenched, varieties of racism that characterize our times.”²¹ Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged out of this need, and became “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power”²² and differs from traditional civil rights “which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress.” CRT also seeks not only to “understand our social situation, but to change it.”²³ Two key tenets of Critical Race Theory that are applicable to Howard Fuller’s life and activism are the ideas of “interest convergence” and a necessary “critique of liberalism.”

According to Delgado and Stefancic, Derrick Bell was CRT’s “intellectual father figure,” and the developer of the concept of interest convergence.²⁴ Interest convergence is the idea that “white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for blacks only when such advances also promote white self-interest.”²⁵ Derrick Bell applied this idea directly to the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision by drawing attention to the fact that the NAACP had been fighting for school desegregation for years before the 1954 decision. He argued that the case was decided because “world and domestic

²¹ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, ed., *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), xvi.

²² Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵ Delgado and Stefancic, ed., *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, xvii.

considerations—not moral qualms over blacks’ plight”²⁶ were crucial to garner the support of countries that could potentially fall to communism. The United States, Bell argued, needed to appear to be improving the lives of minorities in their own land if they were going to gain the loyalty of non-whites around the world.²⁷ Fuller would see instances of interest convergence during his activism and would act on them to advance his race, regardless of whom this led him to ally with.

Critical race theorists do not see liberalism as an adequate way to address racial problems in America. Delgado and Stefancic describe liberalism as “a system of civil rights litigation and activism characterized by incrementalism, faith in the legal system, and hope for progress.”²⁸ Howard Fuller also holds these critiques. The most compelling part of this criticism is CRT’s criticism of rights. For these theorists, “Rights are almost always procedural (for example, to a fair process) rather than substantive (for example, to food, housing, or education)”²⁹ and see them as inhibiting progress for minorities because once rights are obtained, “the minority group is left little better than it was before, if not worse. Its friends, the liberals, believing the problems has been solved, go on to something else, such as saving the whales, while its adversaries, the conservatives, furious that the Supreme Court has given way once again to undeserving minorities, set up their resistance.”³⁰ As Fuller’s activism took place after many rights for blacks were established by legislation such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, this critique is important in exploring his approaches. While rights may have already been won in court, the actual impact they were having on Fuller’s people was limited.

²⁶ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 18-19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁸ Delgado and Stefancic, ed., *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, 1.

²⁹ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

Fuller himself has criticized liberalism, which has led him to not identify directly with any political party. This helps to solidify his identity as a race man, rather than anything affiliating him with a political side.

This project has been divided into five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 discusses Fuller's life from birth through his work in Durham, North Carolina. Fuller moved to Milwaukee in 1948 and by high school had emerged as a leader and active member of the community. Fuller attended North Division High School when it was transitioning from a predominantly white to a predominantly black institution and went on to become the first black man to graduate from Carroll College, receiving a bachelor's degree in sociology in 1962.³¹ Fuller attended Western Reserve University (now Case Western) and was greatly affected by the activist work he did in Cleveland while attending school. This led him to take a position within the national War on Poverty Program in Durham, North Carolina, after completing a Master's degree in Social Administration in 1964.³² In Durham, his support for integration shifted to a desire for black-controlled black educational systems. From protesting housing discrimination, to organizing workers, to opening his own all-black university, Fuller worked in Durham until he exhausted himself and decided to move back to Milwaukee in 1976. Chapter 3 tells the story of Howard Fuller's return to Wisconsin and the various jobs he held and battles he fought to advance his race. This culminated in his appointment as superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools in 1991. From fighting to create an all-black school district, to expanding the availability of vouchers for education, Fuller's

³¹ Howard Fuller, interview by Jonathan Coleman (transcript), June 27, 1991, in *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 1, Tape 15, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

³² Bamberger, "The Education of Howard Fuller," 57.

appointment was a surprise to many, but his controversial ideas gained positive and critical national attention for both Fuller and the Milwaukee Public School district. Chapter 4 explores negative local reactions to Fuller, leading to his resignation as superintendent but his rise as a national advocate for the expansion of school choice. This chapter also discusses the school choice debate on a broader scale. Chapter 5 concludes the analysis of Howard Fuller as a race man who has taken evolving approaches to providing opportunities for low-income blacks in America, and explains where Howard Fuller is today.

For this project, all known available texts written about Fuller and the Milwaukee Public schools were sought out in order to explain his life and activism. Much has been written about Milwaukee Public Schools that provides factual information and sheds interpretive light on the system Howard Fuller would eventually work within and against. As these histories are important sources of information, they will be referenced and cited throughout this writing; this thesis does not, however, attempt to supersede their scholarly interpretations. Jack Dougherty, in *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*,³³ discusses educational reform movements in Milwaukee, with special attention paid to their leaders, from World War I until the late 1980s. Bill Dahlk, in *Against the Wind: African Americans & the Schools in Milwaukee, 1963-2002*,³⁴ provides an impressive amount of factual information about MPS, from leaders and policies to student make-up and funding. While Dahlk does not provide the kind of narrative Dougherty does, the plethora of straightforward information is helpful in

³³ Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

³⁴ Bill Dahlk, *Against the Wind: African Americans & the Schools in Milwaukee, 1963-2003*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010).

understanding MPS as a context that Howard Fuller operated within. James K. Nelsen wrote his Master's thesis on "Racial Integration and the Milwaukee Public Schools, 1963-2003,"³⁵ which provides more helpful information on the racial climate of the school system Fuller would come to lead. With a focus just on racial integration, Nelsen provides accessible information about his topic without getting bogged down by a complete history of MPS or its leaders. Jonathan Coleman wrote *Long Way to Go: Black and White in America*³⁶ to examine racism in America with Milwaukee as its focus. Although Coleman does not focus on education, the racial component within educational politics and both criticisms and praise of Howard Fuller as a black leader are explored and useful to this project.

While these works focused on important aspects of Milwaukee or education that Howard Fuller was involved in, none focused exclusively on Howard Fuller and his life story. For this project, the archival copies of interviews authors Coleman and Dougherty conducted were used extensively to explain Fuller with his own voice. Jonathan Coleman also recorded some of Fuller's speeches and meetings, providing a unique insight into his life.³⁷ In 1991, Fuller started teaching a class on Saturday mornings called the Commando Project. Most of the students were black Muslims from the North side of Milwaukee. According to Fuller, the purpose of these classes was "to get people to understand the trends in the development of African-American history."³⁸ Transcripts from these meetings are analyzed here when discussing Fuller's time in college,

³⁵ James K. Nelsen, "Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools, 1963-2003," (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2003).

³⁶ Jonathan Coleman, *Long Way to Go: Black and White in America*.

³⁷ *Jonathan Coleman papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 127, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

³⁸ Coleman, *Long Way to Go*, 103.

Cleveland, Durham, and as Milwaukee Public School's superintendent. Jack Dougherty's archival collection on Fuller includes newspaper articles, interview transcripts of Fuller from other journalists, and other writers' features on Fuller.³⁹ These, along with newspaper articles from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and one of Milwaukee's black newspapers, *The Milwaukee Courier*, are also used to explain his life. Fuller's own writings are also used to tell his story through his own voice. Scholarly articles Fuller has written, as well as his dissertation from Marquette University have helped to explain his opinion and philosophy behind school reform, primarily in Milwaukee, and are used to show his continuing activism. It is important to note that information regarding Fuller's time in Madison, working as Secretary of the Department of Employee Relations from 1984-1986, was not available for this thesis. Who Fuller worked with and the political and business partnerships he cultivated during this time are unknown, begging the question of how this time affected his evolving stance on schools choice. Beyond that gap, this thesis synthesizes the secondary sources on Milwaukee and MPS as well as the primary sources written about and by Fuller to establish a new perspective on Fuller by shedding light on his activism and life.

Howard Fuller went from fighting for school integration in Cleveland in the 1970s, to pushing to create an all-black school system in Milwaukee in the 1980s, to vehemently promoting school choice, the provision of public funding for private education, in the 1990s. It is difficult to understand these shifts, and process how one man can seemingly change his approaches to reform so drastically. This thesis aims to make sense of him in a time and place of problematic history, and show that through evolving

³⁹ *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records, 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

approaches, Fuller continually tried to advance his race and has used his status as a successful black man to do so. This solidifies him a race man. In analyzing decades of Howard Fuller's civil rights activism and attempting to understand his changing stances, this project will help to dismantle the dominant linear narrative historians have commonly used regarding the Civil Rights movement. Fuller's story shows that his evolving approaches are responses to specific contexts that created the need for refined ideologies in order to achieve his goal. In that respect, Howard Fuller embodies the strategy of the northern civil rights movement as a whole: using a variety of approaches in response to the changing political, cultural and activist climate over time implemented to empower blacks and achieve racial equality. All of these resources are used to tell a comprehensive important story about Fuller and his life's work.

CHAPTER TWO

POWER CONCEDES NOTHING WITHOUT DEMAND

Howard Fuller's early life laid the foundation for the inspired leader he would become. This chapter will discuss Fuller's life from birth in Shreveport, to growing up in Milwaukee, to higher education in Cleveland, to early jobs in Durham, and argue that those formative years played a crucial role in developing Fuller's belief that he had a responsibility to uplifting his race. Being a part of the Second Great Migration, Fuller experienced a northern city as it transformed from a predominantly white to a racially mixed population. The segregated community he grew up in helped shape his idea of what children can expect from their neighborhoods, provided successful black role models he looked up to, and reinforced the importance of education. This chapter will show the beginnings of Howard Fuller the leader, from his all-black high school to his all-white college, and his philosophical evolution from non-violence to direct action. It will argue that Fuller's youth allowed him to experiment with many different ideas on how to advance his race, allowing him (in his later years of activism) to reject those approaches that had not worked while utilizing those that had.

Howard Fuller was an only child born to Tom and Juanita Fuller on January 14, 1941 in Shreveport, Louisiana. When Fuller was two years old, his parents divorced and his mother moved to Milwaukee in order to explore employment opportunities.⁴⁰ Howard Fuller lived with his grandmother in Shreveport until he too moved to Milwaukee to be

⁴⁰ Clipping, Kevin Merida, "Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 21, 1982, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records, 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 39.

with his mother and stepfather at seven years old.⁴¹ The population of blacks in Milwaukee in 1945 was 10,200, 1.6 percent of the total population.⁴² Joe William Trotter Jr., a historian from Carnegie-Mellon University reported that during this time, “Afro-Americans increasingly filled the areas between Wright and Walnut streets on the north and 8th and 12th streets to the west, although State and Third streets, respectively, remained the southern and eastern boundaries.” Trotter continued, “Nearly 97 percent of the Afro-American population resided in blocks comprising the northern Near Downtown district.”⁴³ This isolation of blacks in Milwaukee “resulted from several interrelated factors in addition to depressed economic status: municipal zoning ordinances, restrictive housing covenants, discriminatory federal housing policies, housing competition between blacks and working-class whites, and the internal social dynamics of the African-American community.”⁴⁴ While these restrictions relegated blacks in Milwaukee to the worst, most undesired housing, according to historian Jonathan Coleman the sharply divided racial community had its advantages. “The black community as a whole was small and tight-knit back in the late forties and fifties, and saw its responsibility as a collective one, especially to each other’s children.”⁴⁵ Fuller also lived in “a community where people went off to work, all sorts of people—from the factory workers who punched in at A.O. Smith and American Motors to teachers and clergymen to doctors and

⁴¹ Tom Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” *Milwaukee Magazine*, July 1998, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records*, 1995, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 40.

⁴² Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 149.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Coleman, *Long Way to Go: Black and White in America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), 38.

lawyers in fine suits with snappy briefcases.”⁴⁶ Coleman argued, “If there were any pluses to segregation, this was perhaps the biggest one—because everybody, regardless of income, more or less lived within close proximity of everybody else, there was a sense of unity, of being part of a larger family a feeling that if a doctor lived next door to you, what was to prevent you from becoming a doctor too?”⁴⁷

Housing shortages in Milwaukee were a result of the influx of black and white war workers moving to industrial cities during the late 1930s and early 1940s and were compounded by the return of veterans from overseas at World War II’s end. While the issue of public housing was debated on both the city and state level, the housing crisis for black Milwaukeeans could not be denied. According to historian Phyllis M. Santacrocce,

At the end of the war the issue of housing for black Milwaukeeans finally began to move into political discourse. A 1944 report on housing conditions in the Sixth Ward, home to Milwaukee’s growing black population, noted that the area was blighted and suffered from higher than normal mortality rates and incredible poverty. The report called for the newly created MHA [Milwaukee Housing Authority] to build a project in the area and for the city to enforce ordinances relating to property standards... One of the first tasks of the newly created MHA was to request federal money to build approximately 140 war housing units for Blacks in the Sixth Ward. Before the Sixth Ward project received final approval the war came to an end, requiring conversion of the project from war worker housing to low-income housing.⁴⁸

Through the end of the war and into the 1950s, the black population continued to rise in Milwaukee. Milwaukee’s socialist mayor, Frank Zeidler’s, “first and most immediate goal was the building of public housing.”⁴⁹ His efforts resulted in the building of Hillside Terrace, where Fuller resided throughout his childhood. Fuller’s community as a boy

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Phyllis M. Santacrocce, “Rediscovering the Role of the State: Housing Policy and Practice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1900-1970” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009), 90-91.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 129.

provided successful role models for children in the area: people who proved that if they tried hard enough, they could be anything they wanted to be. Fuller's status as a low-income resident of Hillside would not change that because, "though they didn't have much money, they never thought of themselves as poor, and it never occurred to Fuller that he wouldn't make it, that he wouldn't be able to achieve *anything* he set out to achieve."⁵⁰

Fuller's mother enrolled him in the St. Boniface Catholic parochial school, making him the only black student in his third-grade class.⁵¹ He was an active boy in his community, "involved in boys' clubs and neighborhood centers and went to church every Sunday, where he was an altar boy."⁵² On Saturdays while shopping with his mother, she would drive by the child detention center as a warning to him of where he could end up if he "did not behave himself."⁵³ This resonated with Fuller as he started high school. According to journalist Kevin Merida, most black students in Milwaukee in the 1950s attended either Lincoln or North Division High School.⁵⁴ Fuller attended the latter from 1954-1958, during the time when North Division transitioned from a predominantly white to a predominantly black school.⁵⁵ At North Division, Fuller started a trend of leading "the student body of every school he attended."⁵⁶ Fuller was also a leader on the basketball court. In his senior year at North Division, Fuller was selected as both an All-City and All-State player and led the Blue Devils basketball team to an undefeated 15-0

⁵⁰ Ibid, 38, emphasis in original.

⁵¹ Merida, "Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active."

⁵² Bamberger, "The Education of Howard Fuller," 39.

⁵³ Merida, "Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active."

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Howard Fuller at Commando meeting (transcript), January 11, 1992, in *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 6, Tape 93, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 27.

⁵⁶ Coleman, *Long Way to Go*, 104.

season.⁵⁷ Fuller used his basketball skills to gain the opportunity of paying for college. Although Marquette University and the University of New Mexico offered him basketball scholarships, Carroll College in Waukesha, Wisconsin offered him a Trailblazer scholarship. This meant that even if Fuller became injured or unable to play basketball, he would still be offered an education based on academic merit. As Fuller put it, “it was secure.”⁵⁸

Fuller’s time at Carroll College was an adjustment from his time at North Division. Transitioning from an all-black to an all-white world pushed him to succeed and become comfortable in situations he had never before been in. While reflecting on his time at Carroll, Fuller told a Saturday morning class he began teaching nearly four decades later about the experience:

When my mother dropped me off at age 17, I went by myself to Carroll College. What happens is you get caught in between two worlds. In simple terms, you are out there and I was out there and people would say why do you have a mustache? I was trying to figure out how I was going to survive out there, and then you come home and people are doing new dances and you just in between two worlds and not in either one. It was a bittersweet experience in the sense that during your college years, that is a time of social life, and stuff like that. I didn’t have no social life... No matter what anybody tells you, you do take on some of the characteristics of that place to survive... like it or not, you take on some of those characteristics. It doesn’t mean that you take on all of them, but you take on some. You always got that.”⁵⁹

Navigating these two worlds would become a consistent part of Fuller’s life and career.

His experience at Carroll College was a positive one, with his team supporting him on and off the court. Fuller joined a white fraternity that some of his teammates were a part

⁵⁷ Merida, “Howard Fuller: 60 Activist Still Active.”

⁵⁸ Howard Fuller at Commando meeting (transcript), January 11, 1992, in *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 6, Tape 93, Gold Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 27-29.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

of, and while at a tournament in Southern Illinois when Fuller was denied service at a restaurant, the entire team walked out in solidarity.⁶⁰ In 1962, Fuller graduated from Carroll College with a bachelor's degree in Sociology.⁶¹

Fuller saw himself as a pioneer when he began attending Carroll College in 1958.⁶² While Fuller experienced success in the nearly all-white world, he felt as though he was losing some of his blackness. This led him to Cleveland, Ohio, seeking a Master's degree in Social Administration from Western Reserve University. Fuller told historian Jack Dougherty that after being "caught in-between two worlds" in Cleveland, it "took me a long time to regain my sense of myself as a black person... Cleveland was a bridge to that. North Carolina solidified it."⁶³ Fuller told his Saturday morning students years later about the growing discomfort he felt with whites at Carroll College seeing him as an exceptional black man simply because he was successful:

I know this from my own experience, is that you go out somewhere... like I did at Carroll, and they find out you can speak English and you can write. For some white people this is a revelation. So then what happens is they start talking about you as special, a special Negro. All the rest of them are still like they are, but you, you're special, so we're going to create a separate category for you that distinguishes you from the rest of them. What would you call that? The interesting thing about racism is, you can have a person who is racist and still think they are being kind to you. But even the essence of their kindness is a reflection of racism.⁶⁴

While attending school in Cleveland, Fuller became involved in the city's school integration movement. After the Supreme Court had decided in 1954 that, "separate

⁶⁰ Merida, "Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active."

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty (transcript), in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records, 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 4.

⁶³ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁴ Howard Fuller at Commando meeting (transcript), February 1 1992, in *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 5, Tape 70, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 34.

educational facilities are inherently unequal,”⁶⁵ primarily black parents and other community members across the country sought to integrate their public schools. Fuller would help lead this fight in Cleveland.

Inequality in public school systems was rampant in the United States in the twentieth century as well as efforts to reduce those inequalities. According to historian Thomas J. Sugrue, “Parent-led school boycotts grew from a deep taproot: the desire for equal education and the frustration at the persistence of separate, unequal schools.”⁶⁶ He continued, “Blacks who migrated northward held high expectations about education... They saw education as a ticket out of poverty, but their hopes were often dashed when they confronted the racial barriers to equal education above the Mason-Dixon Line.”⁶⁷ While opinions on how to address the problem of unequal education varied at the time between integration and better separate schools, “For most black parents in the postwar years...the arguments for and against segregated schools were too abstract. Parents of school-children had to make decisions about their children’s education in the short run, and they would take better education in whatever form it came. That said, between the 1940s and the 1960s, the lion’s share of civil right activists—from intellectuals to national civil rights organizers to grassroots protestors—demanded an end to separate schools.”⁶⁸ This national trend would influence Howard Fuller’s introduction to civil rights activism.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Sonya Douglass Horsford, *Learning in a Burning House: Educational Inequality Ideology, and (Dis)Integration* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 15.

⁶⁶ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2009), 170.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 171

⁶⁸ Ibid., 173.

In Cleveland, as president of the student senate of the school of social work at Western Reserve University, Fuller was responsible for organizing students to attend peaceful protests.⁶⁹ According to journalist Kevin Merida, “Fuller and others peacefully had opposed the building of a new public school in a predominantly black portion of the Glenville area of the city on the grounds that it surely would be segregated. In 1964, the theme of civil rights protest was integration.”⁷⁰ When asked what his and other protesters’ goal was in Cleveland during this time, Fuller explained, “Well, I think it was much more of, to the degree that I understood it, integration, in the sense that I was fighting to say we had to integrate the schools. I had not yet reached the point of nationalism... So I was very clear. To the extent that I had any clarity, that we were fighting for integration, to make sure that black kids were able to attend schools with white kids, and that they were not going to be segregated within the schools that they were attending.”⁷¹ On April 7, 1964, after being arrested and released for participating in a sit-in at the school board, Fuller went to the site of the new school to join the demonstration and try to block the construction. Bruce Klunder, a white Presbyterian minister and a founding member of Cleveland’s CORE chapter since 1962 organized and led the protest to stop construction for the Stephen E. Howe Elementary School. Fuller and three other activists laid in front of the bulldozer, blocking its path, while Klunder lay behind. “The operator, seeking to avoid the protestors in front of him, unknowingly backed over Klunder, killing him instantly.”⁷² According to Fuller, watching an innocent

⁶⁹ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty (transcript), in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records*, 1995, 4.

⁷⁰ Merida, “Howard Fuller, 60s Activist Still Active.”

⁷¹ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty (transcript), in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records* 1995, 3.

⁷² Encyclopedia of Cleveland, “Bruce Klunder,” <http://ech.case.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=KBW>.

man lose his life in the midst of an intergenerational peaceful protest “was the end of my non-violent career... I mean non-violence as a philosophy.”⁷³

This change would be reinforced by Fuller’s first exposure to Malcolm X in Cleveland that same year. Malcolm X was a prominent member of the Nation of Islam, rising to fame through public speeches and presentations exposing the injustices black Americans were facing at the hands of whites. After leaving the Nation of Islam in 1964, Malcolm continued speaking and fighting for the liberation of black Americans. On February 14, 1965, Malcolm spoke in Detroit, Michigan. The ideas espoused during this speech show two philosophies of Malcolm X that would greatly influence Howard Fuller. The first was Malcolm’s connection of black Americans to their homeland:

First you have to realize that up until 1959 Africa was dominated by the colonial powers. And by the colonial powers of Europe having complete control over Africa, they projected the image of Africa negatively. They projected Africa always in a negative light: jungles, savages, cannibals, nothing civilized. Why then naturally it was so negative [that] it was negative to you and me, and you and I began to hate it. We didn't want anybody telling us anything about Africa, much less calling us Africans. In hating Africa and in hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing it. Because you can't hate the roots of a tree and not hate the tree. You can't hate your origin and not end up hating yourself. You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself.⁷⁴

The second was Malcolm’s philosophy on non-violence.

We get tricked into being nonviolent, and when somebody stands up and talks like I just did, they say, "Why, he's advocating violence!" Isn't that what they say? Every time you pick up your newspaper, you see where one of these things has written into it that I'm advocating violence. I have never advocated any violence. I've only said that Black people who are the victims of organized violence perpetrated upon us by the Klan, the Citizens' Council, and many other forms, we should defend ourselves. And when I say that we should defend ourselves against the violence of others,

⁷³ Merida, “Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active.”

⁷⁴ Malcolm X, “After the Bombing/Speech at Ford Auditorium,” (transcript) *Malcolm*- February 14, 1965, ed. by the Malcolm X Museum and Noman Ali, http://www.malcolm-x.org/speeches/spc_021465.htm.

they use their press skillfully to make the world think that I'm calling on violence, period. I wouldn't call on anybody to be violent without a cause. But I think the Black man in this country, above and beyond people all over the world, will be more justified when he stands up and starts to protect himself, no matter how many necks he has to break and heads he has to crack.⁷⁵

According to Fuller, Malcolm X “scared him to death,” as he had been conditioned to “reject the views of Malcolm, who was portrayed as a raging madman preaching violence.” Fuller told the *Milwaukee County Journal*, one of the city’s black newspapers, that, “I saw myself as an integrationist and Malcolm was teaching separation. I was for non-violence and allegedly Malcolm was teaching violence. I was for supporting the philosophies of supporting Dr. King—calling for ‘loving the enemy’—Malcolm was preaching the philosophy that called for tick for tack (sic).”⁷⁶ After Fuller’s experience with the devastating effects of non-violent protest in Cleveland, for him Malcolm X and his philosophies were becoming less frightening and more fascinating.

After completing his Master’s degree in Cleveland, Fuller moved to Chicago “to work as a job development specialist for the Urban League. After 11 months there, youthful impatience and a desire to do what he was trained to do prompted Fuller to take a job as the director of community development with Operation Breakthrough (a local office of the Office of Economic Opportunity) in Durham, North Carolina.”⁷⁷ This program was part of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, an effort in the 1960s to use the federal government’s influence to reduce poverty for Americans. In a speech at the University of Michigan in May of 1964, Johnson asked, “Will you join in the battle to

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Clipping, Nathan Conyers, “Liberation Can’t be Won Unless Blacks Know Their History,” *Milwaukee County Journal*, March 7, 1979, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records, 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

⁷⁷ Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 57.

give every citizen an escape from the crushing weight of poverty?” and told students, “The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use [our] wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization.”⁷⁸ According to Thomas Sugrue, “By and large, War on Poverty programs embodied the conventional wisdom of mainstream economists and social welfare advocates, and focused on behavioral modification as the solution to poverty.”⁷⁹ It was through the War on Poverty that the Office of Economic Opportunity funded programs such as Operation Breakthrough across the country. It was here that Howard Fuller would continue to grow as an activist and leader, recognize his own limitations, and reinforce the importance of responsibility to help uplift those in his community, and other communities of the oppressed.

Fuller’s work in Durham initially involved fighting for housing rights for low-income blacks in the city. According to journalist Tom Bamberger, it was in Durham that Fuller accepted late nineteenth-century black abolitionist, author, and statesman Frederick Douglass’ philosophy that “If there is no struggle, there is no progress... because power concedes nothing without a demand.”⁸⁰ Through Operation Breakthrough, “Fuller directed anti-poverty and community development programs. He helped black high school students protest school policy.”⁸¹ Fuller’s work in Durham coincided with the development and expansion of the Black Power Movement. According to author A.P. McDonald Jr., “‘Black Power’ refers to the black man’s power of control over himself,

⁷⁸ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Will you Join in the Battle to Build the Great Society: Remarks at the University of Michigan,” in *“Takin’ it to the Streets”: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 82-83

⁷⁹ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 264.

⁸⁰ Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 57.

⁸¹ Merida, “Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active.”

not (as some believe) his control over the white man—especially not in the sense of physical force. The Black Power movement (teaching Blacks that they do have some control over their destinies) is one of the most important social events of recent history, and is crucial to the upgrading of black men everywhere.”⁸² As to the development of Black Power, historian Komozi Woodard wrote, “The Black Power organizations were fashioned in the aftermath of the urban uprisings that supplied hundreds of new activists to populate the new organizations. The fusion between those leaders, organizations, and the intense consciousness of racial oppression became incredibly powerful in the context of the black urban uprisings of the 1960s.”⁸³ The Newark Rebellion that took place in July of 1967 began because of frustrations in Newark with “housing, education, unemployment and police brutality. Similar to the problems in Chicago and Detroit, Newark’s housing crisis was heated by decades of segregated housing and brought to the boiling point by urban renewal policies aimed at the removal of the ghetto population.”⁸⁴ These uprisings caused tensions in urban areas across the country. Cities were concerned of falling to similar fates, and outspoken activists such as Fuller did not ease these concerns.

Less than a week after the Newark Rebellion, Fuller spoke to Durham’s city council about the plight of low-income blacks in the Southern city, warning, “And you all better start doin’ something to benefit these people cause they’re tired and frustrated, and people who get tired and frustrated do things they wouldn’t ordinarily do.”⁸⁵ Although

⁸² A.P. McDonald, Jr., “Black Power,” *Journal of Negro Education* vol. 44, no.4 (Autumn, 1975).

⁸³ Komozi Woodard, “It’s Nation Time in NewArk: Amiri Baraka and the Black Power Experiment in Newark, New Jersey,” in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 288-289.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁸⁵ Fuller, quoted in Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 57.

Fuller had only organized peaceful protests during his time in Durham, “The next morning, huge headlines blazed across the front page of the Durham *Morning Herald*: ‘ANOTHER ‘NEWARK’ THREATENED HERE.’”⁸⁶ Fuller, aware of his perceived threat to whites in Durham, told a group of black college students that same year that, “I have never gone anywhere to start a riot, but you should know I’ve turned the last cheek. The next time I turn a cheek, I’ll follow it with a right cross.”⁸⁷

While Fuller’s profession of violent tactics may have scared some, “despite his outspokenness, Fuller was always impressed by authority and accomplishment, and maintained his mentor relationship with powerful upper-middle class blacks.”⁸⁸ It was one of these relationships, with John Wheeler (chief executive of a “large North Carolina financial institution”), that taught Fuller a valuable lesson he would use for the rest of his life. According to Fuller, Wheeler “never raised his voice,” and,

was probably one of *the* most powerful black people in the country. He had pictures of him and Lyndon Johnson in his office. And the one thing I learned from Mr. Wheeler is you can go into the halls of “power” and still maintain your sense of rage but you can do it in such a way that you stand some chance of coming out with what you went in there to get.”⁸⁹

Fuller would apply this strategy to many of his future battles, making some people think of him as an “Uncle Tom.” For Fuller, it was yet another way to get things accomplished. While Fuller’s philosophies continued to move to the radical left, he began to embrace the idea of Black Power. “Take the word ‘power’ and put black in front if it... All it

⁸⁶ Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 57.

⁸⁷ Fuller, quoted in Merida, “Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active.”

⁸⁸ Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 58.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

means is that black people got to have power to make decisions about their own lives...

Powerlessness breeds a race of beggars.”⁹⁰

Fuller was putting the pieces of discrimination in housing, education, and employment together and becoming more aware that blacks were being strategically disempowered. In an interview given in North Carolina after three years of activism there, Fuller concluded,

All our lives they've been stepping on us and we've been saying thank you sir and turning the other cheek. Dr. King's movement that I went through, that bit about singing we shall overcome and being hit up side the head, I think that if anything of value was brought out it was the sense of being a man to a great number of black men. A feeling that didn't exist before... basic to human beings as far as manhood is the ability to protect oneself and one's family, to make possible a meaningful kind of life and a meaningful existence. Up until this point this has not been possible for black people. The black man has had to live with the idea that he neither could protect himself nor his family nor could he provide for his family any kind of significant existence as a human being.⁹¹

When asked if the marches or civil rights demonstrations were assertive enough Fuller replied,

No. It maybe helped me and others. We got jobs. But for the great masses of black people it hasn't helped anything significantly or changed their lives. So this is why we're in the period we're in now because the problems that we're talkin' about are a lot deeper than being able to come to Harry's to get a cup of coffee and sit and talk to you. The problems are much deeper than that. You can always hope to be President. But the black man doesn't live with any kind of expectation like that... The absence of a present, future, and past.⁹²

In reexamining the white power structure, Fuller also reevaluated his position on integration and *Brown* decision itself. After becoming a part-time lecturer at the

⁹⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁹¹ Clipping, Howard Fuller interview by Robert Brown (transcript), “Where Do We Go From Here? Howard Fuller Speaks Out,” February 24 1968, *North Carolina Anvil*, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Projects*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 4.

⁹² Ibid.

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and experiencing racial tension there, he saw “two flaws” in the “strain of liberalism that emanated” from the Supreme Court decision made nearly a decade earlier, “First, it assumed the system was essentially just and that blacks find their remedies within it; secondly, Brown at least implied that if separate was unequal, then there could not be excellent black institutions.”⁹³ According to Tom Bamberger, Fuller’s response to the first flaw “was to ‘...reject American society as it is.’... Addressing the second flaw, Fuller started his own all-black Malcolm X Liberation University.”⁹⁴ When asked in February of 1968 why he resigned from his teaching position at Chapel Hill, Fuller explained, “Two reasons. One is that I have been saying all the time that black people have to begin putting all their efforts in improving the black community, that they have to bring all their talent and skills to the black community and here I am at UNC. To me there were inconsistencies and I don’t like to be inconsistent in my beliefs and my practices. So I quit. Now I can go and teach black students which I plan to do in March and the other reason was because I didn’t have time. I’m going to make time to teach in a black college.”⁹⁵ Fuller’s desire to leave UNC, however, did not mean he was not willing to work with whites in order to achieve his educational goals. Fuller told journalist Robert Brown,

We are after change. Anybody that can help us bring about change, I want to talk to. But they have to understand that if they are white their participation has to be based on our desires as we see it. As we call the shots. We don’t need to be friends. We don’t have to walk around together and all that stuff. We are talking about practical matters. You see, there’s fervor and then there are things that are practical and at some point you have to sit down and be practical [sic]. At this particular point we are just working on the black community. We must consolidate and unify that black community. We don’t have a whole lot of time to make sure that all

⁹³ Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 58.

⁹⁴ Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 58.

⁹⁵ Howard Fuller interview by Robert Brown, 4.

of our feelings are kept with our white friends. They are just going to have to bear with us. Those who are real and understand that this is a problem we have right now, to develop ourselves, to consolidate and unify ourselves. That's the way it is.⁹⁶

In the spring of 1969, black students at Duke University, “went through the procedures of trying to acquire relevant education at existing schools,”⁹⁷ a black studies program. According to Dr. Tyrone C. Howard, “During the 1960s, the Black-studies movement was initiated by Black college students who were advocates for the inclusion of the life and history of African Americans to be incorporated into the curriculum... These calls were preceded by the early Black ethnic-studies movement of the first part of the century that sought to create accurate images of African Americans’ life and history and to contribute to the establishment of African Americans’ institutions.”⁹⁸ At Duke, after negotiations about the program started, students, according to Fuller, discovered that “they (the administration) weren’t ready to give control to the Black students. They weren’t ready to let Black students design the program the way they really wanted it.”⁹⁹ The students protested, and “seized Duke University’s administration building... and tacked up a banner saying ‘Malcolm X Liberation University.’ Though riot police and tear gas brought the banner down, the school was born.”¹⁰⁰ Fuller wanted the curriculum at Malcolm X Liberation University (MXLU) to be taught with a black focus. This idea “began innocently, says Fuller, by ‘taking any subject and putting ‘black’ in front of it. Black history had to be taught, for example, because it was not being passed

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Clipping, Milton Coleman, “Malcolm X Liberation University Educates from African Agenda,” *Milwaukee Courier*, September 6 1969, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 6.

⁹⁸ Tyrone C. Howard, “Developing Multicultural Curriculum in Higher Education: Strategies for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Brothers of the Academy: Up and Coming Black Scholars Earning our Way in Higher Education*, ed. Lee Jones (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2000), 102-103.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 58.

down within the conventional institutional framework. Inevitably, this led to the need for a historical understanding of the African race, when combined with the knowledge of imperialism exposed by the anti-war movement led the university to a political movement called Pan-Africanism (a global extension of Black Power).”¹⁰¹

While early twentieth century Pan-Africanism focused on African nations’ right to independence and a freedom from oppression, Pan-Africanism eventually became “African nationalism projected on the continental level and strengthened by the support of Afro-Americans in the New World.”¹⁰² In the *Journal of Contemporary History*, Immanuel Geiss provided a historical account of Pan-Africanism, arguing that the colonization that happened in Africa and the West Indies mirrored the situation blacks were living in in the United States, “a quasi-colonial situation whether as slaves or formally emancipated but effectively segregated and discriminated against.”¹⁰³ This is the world Howard Fuller lived in. He had seen blacks in the United States be systematically discriminated against and oppressed, as was happening to blacks everywhere. Geiss wrote about this experience, saying “Rejected by white society as unequals, they [black Americans] were inevitably thrown back on their African background and sought to improve their own status via developing Africa, which they were the first to conceive as a single unit, though often with romanticizing overtones.”¹⁰⁴ Fuller could see a connection between the oppression and struggles African nations were having gaining independence, and the struggles and oppression black Americans were experiencing. Although winning rights on paper, Fuller saw his people living without equal opportunity in housing,

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Immanuel Geiss, “Pan-Africanism,” *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 4, no. 1 (1969): 190.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 195.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 195-196.

education, and employment. This pushed him to open Malcolm X Liberation University with a Pan-African ideology.

One of Milwaukee's black newspapers, *The Milwaukee Courier*, ran an article a few weeks before Malcolm X Liberation University (MXLU) was set to open, describing its approach to education:

Although one might say that the igniting point for the founding of the school was the typical growing frustration with the traditional American systems, the true strength of the institution lies in that it has accepted this inability as fact and gone on from there, thus structuring itself on its own terms rather than as patchwork on an external skeleton.¹⁰⁵

Howard Fuller, who “had experience in trying to integrate black people” into dominant white systems, had come to the conclusion that such inclusion was “highly unlikely in America... ‘Once you really get involved in community organization, where you’re trying to organize Black people to deal with this man’s system,’ said Fuller, ‘the first thing you become aware of is that you really can’t deal with it, and that there’s no sense in trying to get incorporated into it.’”¹⁰⁶ His school’s philosophy mirrored the philosophy of one Black Power activist at the time and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee president, Stokely Carmichael. “Of Carmichael, Fuller explained, ‘He sees that there’s no real sense in Black people talking about getting rid of oppression in this country unless we’re ready to deal with the fact that we’ve got to have an independent African continent as a liberated zone from which to really operate and bring about our own concept of eliminating oppression and our whole relationship to the African nation.’”¹⁰⁷ Because of the deep connection between the liberation of African countries

¹⁰⁵ Coleman, “Malcolm X Liberation University Educates From African Agenda,” 6.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

and the liberation of African Americans, travel to Africa would be a crucial part of MXLU's curriculum.

Fuller traveled to Africa in August of 1971, "where he met with black African leaders and ended up, quite unexpectedly, traveling in the bush for about a month with black freedom fighters in Mozambique."¹⁰⁸ Although the group was bombed once while Fuller was traveling amongst them, very little else occurred during his time there. This gave Fuller a lot of time to walk and think in the homeland he had spoken about at length, and allowed him to "come to terms with what he saw there. One of the most impressive sights, he felt, was the literal empowerment of his people: '[A] sister standing in traditional African dress with an AK-47 automatic rifle draped over her shoulder,' wrote Fuller in his diary, made him feel 'proud to see our people at that level of struggle. Now I am here in the midst of it. No speeches, no rallies, no newspaper articles, no press conferences, just armed struggle against the enemy.'"¹⁰⁹ This was difficult for Fuller to comprehend, however, because here, the enemy was also black. "As soon as I got to Africa, it became clear to me that the... race thing didn't explain the problem because you saw black people under the control of black people, but there was still oppression."¹¹⁰ The oppression Fuller saw was instead based on class, the basis of another philosophical movement gaining popularity: Marxism.

Marxism, named after its intellectual father figure Karl Marx, was a philosophy born from the observation of the relationship between the ruling and ruled classes developed in the mid-nineteenth century. According to historian Eugene Kamenka, Marxism was the belief that,

¹⁰⁸ Bamberger, "The Education of Howard Fuller," 59.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

The introduction of tools, the division of labour, and the rise of private property divide men into social classes, primarily into the class of exploiters, who own and administer the means of production, and the class or classes of the exploited, who actually work and produce... slave owners give way to feudal landlords and feudal landlords give way to the bourgeoisie. The state that pretends to represent the *general* social interest is in fact representing a *sectional* interest, safe-guarding the social and political conditions congenial to the ruling class.¹¹¹

Fuller's experience in Africa mirrored this trend, forcing him to question the relevance of class rather than race in Durham.

Fuller's philosophical switch from Pan-Africanism in the late 1960s to the class-based philosophy of Marxism in the early 1970s would change his activist work. He later reflected on that time in his life, "My mistake in that period was flip-flopping."¹¹² For the first part of his adult life Fuller had seen problems for his people all through the lens of racism. After Mozambique, he thought it was all a matter of class struggle. It was not until years later he realized "for black people in America, it's both. That's something that I'm still grappling with. At different times I take up issues and struggles because I see them as important for the immediate survival of black people. But if you were to ask me, 'Do I think that these things are going to bring about fundamental change in the system?' My answer would have to be no... When I was younger everything was absolutely clear to me. But as I've studied more... I don't have as clear a perspective on the nature of the alternative."¹¹³

Malcolm X Liberation University closed its doors in 1973 after four years in operation. According to Tom Bamberger, "The school had been divided by two political factions: the Pan Africanists, who believed their struggle should continue internationally

¹¹¹ Eugene Kamenka, *The Portable Karl Marx* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), xxxiv.

¹¹² Merida, "Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active."

¹¹³ Ibid.

in Africa, and the Nationalists, who identified with America. Fuller chose America.”¹¹⁴

The *Milwaukee Courier* reported that at MXLU,

Since October 25, 1969, an estimated 125 students had attended the school which had a curriculum aimed at equipping persons with the ideological and technical skills necessary to aid directly in the development of the African continent. They taught the students in 4 skill areas: communications, engineering, biomedics, and agriculture. It originated in renovated warehouses in the heart of Durham’s poverty-ridden black belt, but had moved operations to Greensboro, about 50 miles away, in October 1970. It survived for three years on less than half a million dollars in grants and contributed materials. Fuller, with the closing, stated “We just see that the major contribution we can make to the freedom of all African people is to wage struggle inside this country.”¹¹⁵

After the university shut its doors, Fuller took a job “as a business agent for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees,” and “singlehandedly began to organize hospital workers at Duke University.”¹¹⁶

Fuller’s time in North Carolina reinforced his dedication to his cause, but exposed how difficult facilitating change and bringing together parts of the black community could be. From his work with Duke students, to founding Malcolm X Liberation University, to fighting for worker’s rights, Fuller’s commitment to his activism was beginning to catch up with him. In the summer of 1976, Fuller was involved with the Revolutionary Workers League, “a group of theoretical extremists” that Fuller had brought many of his friends into. The RWL held a two-day meeting in New Jersey that was meant to be a “purge of impurities,” where “friends of Fuller’s were humiliated, mentally tortured and physically beaten by other members of the group.” Fuller felt

¹¹⁴ Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 59.

¹¹⁵ Clipping, Milton Coleman, “Malcolm X Liberation University Closes After 4 Years; Dean Blames Self,” *North Carolina Anvil*, July 7 1973 in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project*, 1995, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 3.

¹¹⁶ Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller, 59.”

“responsible for this debacle,” and realized he had become active in a group that had nothing to do with his “humanistic values and commitment to practical ways of making people’s lives better.”¹¹⁷ When Fuller returned to North Carolina, he broke down. A coworker described, “All of a sudden, it was there—I’m sitting and talking with a man that can’t complete a sentence. He looked like he aged overnight. He was bent over, couldn’t walk and couldn’t talk... We were shocked that someone could be brought down so far.”¹¹⁸ Recognizing he was not being an effective facilitator of change any longer, Fuller returned to Milwaukee ready for a vacation from trying to change the world.

¹¹⁷ Merida, “Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active.”

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

When Howard Fuller returned to Milwaukee, he was coming back to a city that was very different than the one he left nearly twenty years before. As the black population had been continuously increasing, their isolation created overcrowded housing and schools. According to historian Patrick D. Jones,

Between 1890 and 1915, the growth of Milwaukee's black community coincided with increasing racial concentration...For the first time, through a mixture of choice, economic necessity, restrictive housing covenants, discriminatory real estate and loan practices, and overt racism, an identifiable thirty-five block "black district", refereed to variously as "Little Africa" "Bronzeville," or, later, "the inner core," emerged on the near North Side, an area also known for its brothels, liquor joints, and gambling dens. By 1940, the inner core had expanded to a seventy-five block area and housed more than 90 percent of Milwaukee's black population.¹¹⁹

As the black population "grew over 700 percent in twenty-five years, rising from less than 2 percent of the population in 1945 to nearly 15 percent in 1970," Jones continued, "The impact of this rise in population on the inner core was equally striking, intensifying racial segregation and fueling the deterioration of housing, health, and urban education."¹²⁰ Exhausted and broken, Fuller took time adjusting to this new Milwaukee before getting back into the fight to provide quality education for low-income blacks. While his drive as a race man remained, Fuller needed to understand his surroundings and adjust to Milwaukee before he could positively affect its black community.

This chapter will explore Howard Fuller's return to Milwaukee through his rise to the superintendence of the Milwaukee Public Schools. Discussing the black political

¹¹⁹ Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 19.

¹²⁰ Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 23-24.

spectrum in Milwaukee at the time, this chapter will argue that there has never been a consensus among blacks in Milwaukee on how to best provide quality education to Milwaukee Public School students. Howard Fuller's commitment to his race never meant that he had their unanimous support, complicating his work and limiting his ability to facilitate change. As a race man Fuller never wavered in doing what he hoped would liberate his people and provide them a chance of success, even if other blacks disagreed. Fuller had made it as a black man who grew up in Milwaukee, but did not take that opportunity to advance himself only. Instead, he felt a responsibility to use his organizing capabilities, leadership qualities, and middle-class status to try and open up the same opportunities that had been available to him to the next generation of Milwaukee blacks.

It is crucial to understand the city and educational system Fuller was returning to in order to understand his eventual activism. The redistribution of population after World War II dramatically changed the racial and economic makeup of people within the Milwaukee metropolitan area. As suburbs became increasingly white, residential segregation forced black Milwaukeeans to stay within the city limits. These changes fueled the integrationist fight in Milwaukee by Lloyd Barbee, president of the Wisconsin NAACP in the early 1960s. The long battle Barbee fought led to an increased desire for community control of black schools, a movement Howard Fuller would lead.

In 1954, the Supreme Court decided the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, declaring that separate school accommodations were inherently unequal, legally overturning segregation in public schools. In the South, schools and institutions were forced to implement vast changes in order to comply with the new law. Operating under Jim Crow laws, southern states experienced *de jure* segregation, a separation of the

population based on race implemented and supported by law. Northern cities and states, however, practiced *de facto* segregation, where the population was separated by race due to housing patterns and a reliance on neighborhood school systems. Housing patterns became segregated as whites took advantage of opportunities to move out of the cities, opportunities that were denied to blacks. Those whites that remained in the city fought to keep their neighborhoods from integrating. Because the *Brown* decision only applied to those school systems segregated by law, Northern activists took it upon themselves to show the schools in these cities were in fact in violation of *Brown* based on their intense, deliberate separation of students by race. According to historian James K. Nelsen, “if change was to come, it would have to begin at the local level—the domain under which schools traditionally fell. Whether it was Topeka, Little Rock, Montgomery, Birmingham, or elsewhere, integration came from a combination of civil disobedience followed by legal action. These then became the twin tasks of civil rights advocates in cities such as... Milwaukee—to mobilize community support in acts of protest and to mount a legal challenge to *de facto* segregation.”¹²¹

Attorney Lloyd Barbee was a staunch supporter of integration and felt anything short of a totally integrated school system was unacceptable. In 1963, at a speech to the Milwaukee Junior Bar Association, “Barbee launched Milwaukee’s first sustained public challenge to segregated schools. ‘If the *Brown* decision means anything,’ he called out to his audience, ‘it means that school segregation is unconstitutional wherever it exists, north or south.’”¹²² According to Jack Dougherty, Barbee claimed that “Milwaukee

¹²¹ James K. Nelsen, “Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools, 1963-2003” (Master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2003), 23.

¹²² Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 71.

public schools were in violation of the Supreme Court ruling that segregation was inherently unequal, citing as proof the rising number of predominantly black schools and the long-standing practice of assigning the vast majority of black teachers to work in them.”¹²³ At this meeting Barbee made a “public declaration of Milwaukee’s school integration campaign”¹²⁴ and would combine on-the-ground activism and the legal system to achieve that goal.

Discrimination in school-transfer policies, intact busing, and the hiring and placing of teachers were some of the issues Barbee claimed were creating inequality in MPS. According to Bill Dahlk, “The primary charge of reformers who wanted the delivery of quality education was that the *human* input into the education of black children was unacceptable.”¹²⁵ In support of this claim, Dahlk explained that, “Teacher turnover was higher in [inner] core schools, and since seniority was the general rule guiding teacher transfers, these schools had a greater percentage of less-experienced teachers.”¹²⁶ Other grievances Milwaukee blacks had with MPS were a result of the Milwaukee Public School Board’s attempts to address *Brown* without dealing with segregation directly. Two examples of this were allowing students to transfer from their neighborhood school to any school within the system and intact busing. Students utilizing the school transfer policy were disproportionately white, while students being bused were disproportionately black. Discussing intact busing, Bill Dahlk explained, “Through this method, an entire black class would be bused to a white school with an available classroom... At the receiving school members of the black class would not be dispersed

¹²³ Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 71-72.

¹²⁴ Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 85.

¹²⁵ Bill Dahlk, *Against the Wind: African Americans & the Schools in Milwaukee, 1963-2003* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010), 38, emphasis in the original.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

across various classrooms, but would be taught in their ‘own’ room. Often the class would then be bused back to its home school *for lunch*... and then back to the receiving school for afternoon classes.”¹²⁷ Isolating these students and reducing their classroom time made this a racist policy that enraged many blacks. Lloyd Barbee took this criticism even further, arguing that the policy was not only racist, but also psychologically damaging.

According to James K. Nelsen, “Barbee began researching the extent of racial segregation in MPS in 1962,” and after a year and a half asked to meet with then “State School Superintendent Angus P. Rothwell to present evidence that *de facto* segregation existed in Milwaukee and was harmful to children.”¹²⁸ As a result Rothwell sent questionnaires to five Wisconsin superintendents and “After reading the results... declared that he could find no evidence that MPS intended to segregate students.”¹²⁹ Rothwell and other white Milwaukeeans attributed the racial makeup of schools to the neighborhood school policy MPS operated under. Milwaukee’s intense ethnic history supported this explanation, with different groups living in distinct neighborhood enclaves throughout the city, resulting in homogenous neighborhood schools. This longstanding practice made it difficult for reform activists fighting for integration to garner public support.¹³⁰ Pressure from the NAACP caused the school board to create “a seven-member Committee on Equality and Educational Opportunity in August 1963 to study racial

¹²⁷ Ibid., 35, emphasis in original.

¹²⁸ Nelsen, “Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools.”

¹²⁹ Ibid., 40.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

problems in MPS.”¹³¹ Four conservatives and three liberals made up the committee, and in the fall of 1963 hearings about the racial issues surrounding MPS began.¹³²

In their first meeting with the board (nicknamed the Story committee after its most conservative member, attorney Harold Story), “a coalition of members of the NAACP, CORE, and the Near Northside Non-Partisan Conference (NNNPC), requested at least 15 minutes at a school board meeting to present a CORE report on problems with segregated education in Milwaukee.”¹³³ The four problems they discussed were problems with intact busing, “failure to assign black teachers to black schools, the assignment of inexperienced teachers to black schools, and alleged discrimination in the ‘free-transfer policy.’”¹³⁴ At the end of the meeting the Wisconsin NAACP also “threatened a school boycott unless plans were put in place by January 30 to integrate the schools.” The coalition was invited back for a second meeting on January 21st.¹³⁵

Harold Story knew that many “established black community organizations” in Milwaukee were not behind Lloyd Barbee and the NAACP’s campaign to integrate the schools. Instead, these groups were in support of “compensatory education;” educational programs aimed at providing the cultural experience disadvantage children were assumed to be lacking.¹³⁶ During this time, “The Milwaukee Urban League continued its struggle to improve black schooling on a separate track from that of Barbee and the Wisconsin NAACP.”¹³⁷ Story “attempted to drive a wedge between them and Barbee’s nascent

¹³¹ Ibid., 42-43.

¹³² Ibid., 43-44.

¹³³ Ibid., 44.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹³⁶ Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 89.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 91.

integrationists”¹³⁸ by bringing in members of the Urban League to speak at the hearings and weaken Barbee’s case. In December 1963 when “The Wisconsin NAACP finally made its presentation” to the board, Barbee insisted that, “No amount of compensatory education will repair the damage done to students and teachers by segregation... Equal educational opportunity is impossible without racial integration.”¹³⁹

At the January 21st hearing, Story and the committee insulted Barbee and the coalition by not allowing him to sit with the representatives from CORE and the NNNCP. Barbee and the coalition walked out, and the media coverage of the incident created more support for Barbee and his cause.¹⁴⁰ Cornelius Golightly, one of the liberal members of the committee, commented that, “The Negro community seems to have consolidated itself on the grounds that the School Board has deliberately made no positive move to concern themselves with the issue raised in July.”¹⁴¹ When the school board did not meet the deadline Barbee’s coalition established for a comprehensive plan to integrate the schools, Barbee and his supporters began picketing and demonstrating against MPS.¹⁴² This led to a broader coalition including Barbee, the NAACP, CORE, the NNNCP, Milwaukee parents, and ministers called “the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC), to which Barbee was elected chairperson. Its purpose was to organize a grassroots movement against school segregation.”¹⁴³ MUSIC was successful in receiving media attention for their protests, pickets, and boycotts, but did not have much of an impact on the committee or the school board. In May of 1965, “Despite the

¹³⁸ Ibid., 89.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 98-101.

¹⁴¹ Golightly in Dahlk, 72.

¹⁴² See Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 72-74, and Nelsen, “Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools,” 47-48.

¹⁴³ Nelsen, “Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools,” 47.

increased pressure, the Story committee voted four to three to recommend the continuation and expansion of compensatory education programs for inner-city schools rather than desegregate.”¹⁴⁴ Barbee and the coalition concluded a more forceful approach including the use of the courts would be necessary for desegregating MPS.¹⁴⁵

Lloyd Barbee filed suit against the Milwaukee Public School board and superintendent on June 17, 1965 “on behalf of the parents of thirty-two black students and nine white students in *Amos et al. vs. the Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*.”¹⁴⁶ Barbee would spend the following fourteen years on this legal case as he “was faced with the formidable task of proving that segregation was not just a result of residential patterns. He had to prove the school board had deliberately tried to keep the school system segregated.”¹⁴⁷ Barbee’s argument focused on five main points:

- 1) The school board established school boundary lines that produced segregation;
- 2) It approved construction of predominantly black schools;
- 3) It allowed white students to transfer but restricted black pupils to segregated schools;
- 4) Instead of taking a “color-blind” approach to staff assignment, it preferred black teachers and other black staff work in black schools and allowed white staff to transfer out of such schools; and
- 5) It failed to integrate “intact” bused students with white students at receiving schools.¹⁴⁸

While Barbee provided compelling arguments for all five of these issues, the most convincing evidence and, according to James K. Nelsen, “perhaps most damaging, was intact busing.”¹⁴⁹ Barbee provided a report on intact busing dating back to 1957 showing clear racial disparities of the program that then Superintendent Howard Vincent could not

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 60.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 65

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 65.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 65.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 74.

defend. Barbee also provided testimony from teachers about the damaging effects of lost classroom time and the ineffectiveness of the program.¹⁵⁰ Lloyd Barbee used this evidence to conclude this process was “psychologically damaging”¹⁵¹ to black students who participated. Although Barbee’s case was strong, fierce opposition from Milwaukee whites and the school board prevented a settlement until 1979. After Barbee successfully won his case against the Milwaukee Public Schools in 1976 the school board appealed the decision, resulting in a three-year retrial. During this time a desegregation plan was implemented in Milwaukee and proved difficult to execute.

During the period of desegregation, Superintendent Lee McMurrin led MPS, a champion of specialty and magnet schools as the way the district could desegregate voluntarily.¹⁵² McMurrin arrived in Milwaukee from Toledo in 1975 while the city awaited the Judge Reynold’s decision regarding desegregation. When the decision was handed down, “McMurrin and his staff were ready with a list of specialty schools to help the city desegregate voluntarily by attracting white students from outlying neighborhoods to inner-city schools.”¹⁵³ Magnet school theory, which was developed in the 1960s, argued that, “families could be enticed into choosing integrated schools by offering them distinctive, improved education programs.”¹⁵⁴ When Judge Reynolds’ decision came down in January of 1976 ordering “MPS authorities to develop a desegregation plan to begin in September of that same year,”¹⁵⁵ McMurrin continued to push magnet schools as the way to achieve desegregation in order to satisfy the ruling’s requirements because,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 76-77.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 77.

¹⁵² Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 295.

¹⁵³ “Ex-MPS Superintendent Lee McMurrin,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 9, 2011.

¹⁵⁴ William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington D. C.: Brookings Institutions, 2002), 11.

¹⁵⁵ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 302.

“McMurrin’s main goal was to achieve as much desegregation as the court required while producing minimal resistance and flight by whites.”¹⁵⁶ McMurrin’s approach to desegregation focused on “a phased-in desegregation approach, relying upon voluntary movement and specialty or magnet schools... Most of the physical movement to achieve desegregation would be done by black children.”¹⁵⁷ This approach to desegregation would create a backlash from the black community. Placing the burden of desegregation on black pupils led Howard Fuller to vehemently oppose the plan.

In March of 1976, Lloyd Barbee told the *Milwaukee Courier*, Milwaukee’s black newspaper, that black parents must “beware of ‘phony’ and ‘rhetorical’ school desegregation proposals.”¹⁵⁸ Discussing the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association (MTEA) and the school board, Barbee warned that the white power structures would try to “feign desegregation” while continuing the status quo of MPS. Over the next three years, through coverage in the *Courier*, it became clear that a settlement would be difficult. Deep distrust of the school board was apparent from black Milwaukeeans, making them wary of any offer. The newspaper also reported examples of resistance to desegregation altogether and a call for community control of the schools.¹⁵⁹ Community control of schools called for neighborhood power over how local schools would be run. Historian Jerald E. Podair in his study of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis in New York wrote,

It is, however, not difficult to understand the eagerness of community control supporters to embrace the idea of community as a means to black

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 314.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 314.

¹⁵⁸ Dan Carpenter, “Barbee: Beware Phony Desegregation Plans,” *Milwaukee Courier*, March 13, 1976, 1.

¹⁵⁹ See “North Division: Build it... and Close it Down,” *Milwaukee Courier*, March 27, 1976 and “Don’t Back, Buck Desegregation,” *Milwaukee Courier*, April 10, 1976.

empowerment... Conditions in black-majority schools were worsening, and the gap in achievement between black and white schools was growing each year. Clearly, something had to change, or an entire generation of black-school children would be lost. It was this sense of political exhaustion and impending catastrophe that led.... survivors of the school integration wars in New York to embrace community control of education with such fervor. Whether or not they understood the full implications of their decision for the long term, in the short run, with ghetto education in crisis, there seemed no other choice.¹⁶⁰

With Milwaukee schools following the same pattern, some activists would fight for a similar approach.

As the retrial continued, different groups emerged to take desegregation efforts into their own hands. Triple O was one of these groups, a community-based organization led by Larry Harwell founded in 1967 to “provide input into policy and services” for Milwaukee public housing residents.¹⁶¹ In 1977 Triple O sponsored a group to explore education efforts in Milwaukee called “Blacks for Two Way Integration.” They began an informal campaign to expose how desegregation was actually affecting black youth,¹⁶² and in September of 1977 issued a statement “calling parents of the Black community to send their children to the schools nearest them” for the start of the 1977-1978 school year,¹⁶³ threatening desegregation efforts.

In the spring of 1979, “attorney Barbee and the school board defendants finally negotiated a settlement that was approved by Judge Reynolds.”¹⁶⁴ According to Jack Dougherty, “The terms guaranteed that at least 75 percent of the city’s students would attend a desegregated school,” and that “these racially balanced schools would be defined

¹⁶⁰ Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike that Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2002), 33.

¹⁶¹ Phyllis M. Santacroce, “Rediscovering the Role of the States: Housing Policy and Practice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1900-1970” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009), 216.

¹⁶² “Triple O Figures Show Most Blacks are Forced Volunteers,” *Milwaukee Courier*, June 18, 1977, 1.

¹⁶³ “Community Votes For... Neighborhood Schools,” *Milwaukee Courier*, September 3, 1977.

¹⁶⁴ Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 165.

as 20 to 60 percent black.”¹⁶⁵ But a lot had changed since Barbee had originally filed the lawsuit. Neighborhood segregation had become more intense, and with the new plan some predominantly black schools were going to have to shift out existing students to make room for potential white students. The forced movement of students this settlement implied, along with the increased support for community control of black schools throughout the retrial, set the stage for a new kind of activism in Milwaukee.

During the second half of the 1960s, blacks in Milwaukee still disagreed on the best approach to providing quality education for black students. According to historian Bill Dahlk, “In Milwaukee, Larry Harwell and the Triple O organizing group he led were the most prominent advocates”¹⁶⁶ for community control. For Harwell, the most troubling aspect of desegregation was the humiliation it implied. He said,

The desegregation battle is nothing more than a farce. Too many of us have been duped into believing that if our children are bused across town and allowed to sit next to a white kid, something magical is going to happen; the white air will swell the black brain. That’s not only ridiculous, it’s racist. The only thing our black child will learn is that he is being taught to believe he is inferior, must go outside his community to learn, and that black teachers can’t teach him, or that he can’t be taught in a Central City school.¹⁶⁷

The settlement that resolved Milwaukee’s desegregation case “left about twenty-three schools all-black.”¹⁶⁸ Integration supporters were unhappy about these schools, and some of these activists “saw the specialty schools as the best way to achieve voluntary desegregation along with quality education.”¹⁶⁹ Specialty schools offered a unique curriculum focused on an academic specialty with the hopes of attracting students from

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 166.

¹⁶⁶ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 347.

¹⁶⁷ Harwell quoted in Dahlk, 348-349.

¹⁶⁸ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 358.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

different parts of the city, facilitating integration. Harwell and other proponents of black influence over black education, on the other hand, saw these schools as an opportunity for increased community control over some educational institutions. This battle would come to a head over what to do with North Division High School, a school that had experienced decline after it transitioned from a predominantly white student body to a predominantly black one in the late 1950s. According to Bill Dahlk, MPS statistics reported that “for the 1978-1979 school year (the first year of operation for the new facility), North had the lowest overall GPA of city high schools (1.124, where A is 4), the highest subject failure rate (46.8 percent), the lowest standardized-test scores, and the third worst attendance (70.5 percent present).”¹⁷⁰ North Division had closed and was set to reopen in September of 1978 as a rebuilt facility with a focus on medicine and dentistry.¹⁷¹ The school board hoped this magnet curriculum would attract white students but were realistic about the difficulty of getting white students to attend school in a predominantly black neighborhood. In order for whites to be attracted to the new school, school officials believed, “The only way to accomplish this feat... would be to clean out the school—rid it of the current student body and start fresh.”¹⁷² What to do with North Division would quickly become the battleground where the fight between integration and community control in Milwaukee would be waged. This fight would also spark the beginning of a long and tumultuous relationship between the Milwaukee Public Schools and Howard Fuller.

Fuller’s primary concerns when he returned to Milwaukee were finding a job to support his family and dealing with his health problems. Fuller needed a back operation,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 361.

¹⁷² Ibid.

and on his way into surgery “he had a myelogram, which left him incapacitated with migraine headaches.”¹⁷³ A college friend got Fuller a job selling insurance for the Equitable Life Assurance Society, and a year later he gained employment as an associate director of the Equal Opportunity Program at Marquette University.¹⁷⁴ Two years into Fuller’s employment, the *Milwaukee County Journal* reported that, “Besides affording disadvantaged students an opportunity to receive a college degree from a prestigious, private university, it focuses on the all-around needs and sensitivities of its students on a one-to-one basis.”¹⁷⁵ The program provided academic support, personal and career counseling, developmental seminars, and financial aid to every student admitted into the program. It also operated on a five-year plan to accommodate students with greater needs or those working while attending school.¹⁷⁶ Fuller’s position at Marquette demonstrated his ongoing commitment to the education of disadvantaged blacks. His job allowed him to assist low-income members of the community eager for educational opportunities without requiring the stressful task of on-the-ground activism. This period improved his health and restored his vigor, which he would need for the battles he would fight in the following months.

When news of the school board’s plan to “clean out” the existing student body of North Division High school spread, both former and current students came together to

¹⁷³ Clipping, Tom Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” *Milwaukee Magazine*, July 1988, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records, 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

¹⁷⁴ Clipping, Kevin Merida, “The Struggle Goes On and So Does Howard Fuller,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 21 1981, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records, 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

¹⁷⁵ Clipping, “Educational Opportunity Program Proves Beneficial to Minority Students,” *Milwaukee County Journal*, February, 28 1979, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records, 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

¹⁷⁶ Imani, “Educational Opportunity Program Helps Minorities Earn Degrees,” *Milwaukee Courier*, April 23, 1977.

fight its implementation. On June 2, 1979, the *Milwaukee Courier* reported the plan for North entailed “the removal of all present students by the fall of 1980. Those students who will then be juniors and seniors will be automatically transferred to other schools. At this point, the school will be closed to all students in the community who will not be involved in a city-wide medical science specialty.” The article described the school board president’s defense of the decision, claiming that this approach was “in the best interest of the community.” During the president’s explanation, protestors of the plan walked out.¹⁷⁷ In the weeks that followed, nearly 10,000 signatures were gathered and students organized public marches.¹⁷⁸ This outpouring of community support and subsequent community action forced the school board to hold a special hearing on the matter. Old high school friends and classmates of Fuller contacted him to join the movement and attend the hearing.¹⁷⁹ Fuller’s fond memories of North Division, and the unequivocal support he felt the community provided him while attending the school drove him to join the fight. His goal to provide the youth in Milwaukee with the same learning experience and community cohesion he grew up with reinforced his commitment to his race. Witnessing instances of integration that continued to isolate blacks while in Durham drove him to make sure black students in Milwaukee did not suffer the same fate. At the special hearing, Fuller impressed the audience and according to historian Jack Dougherty, “delivered a powerful speech about ‘our’ school,”

¹⁷⁷ “North Specialty Approval Prompts Walkout Protest,” *Milwaukee Courier*, June 2, 1979.

¹⁷⁸ Clipping, Scott Anderson, “Triple O Disappointment, Coalition Victory—Two Stories of Struggle,” *Milwaukee Courier*, July 5 1980, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records, 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

¹⁷⁹ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 12/28/1995, *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

We say that it is ours because it does indeed belong to us...The black community is once again being forced to bear the brunt of the so-called integration process...What sacrifice is the white community being asked to make? If this school is going to be such a great thing, then why can't we stay there?... We say no! And ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!¹⁸⁰

Fuller became the spokesman of the Coalition to Save North Division, fighting for community control of the school rather than the racial separatism he had fought for in Durham. Fuller and other opponents “put together an alternative proposal for North. It called for the school to remain essentially a neighborhood high school with a medical-dental specialty and a sixty/forty black/white mix as a goal.”¹⁸¹ Fuller understood the educational reform climate in Milwaukee well enough to know that supporting an integrated North would help garner support for the new plan while creating a quality educational opportunity for every black student who hoped to attend the school. It was not necessary for the school to be all-black in order to provide this opportunity to low-income blacks in the neighborhood, and a broad-based coalition that transcended racial lines would help further the possibility of North remaining accessible to his people. In September 1979 Fuller told reporters that, “the struggle... is not against integration. That is a fallacy. The school should be predominantly Black, although it is important for people to learn to live and function together.” Fuller continued by saying what was most important was his belief that the students “should have some freedom of choice about where they will attend school... if Pulaski, South Division, Hamilton, etc. are 60 percent or more white, why can't we have one school in a black neighborhood that remains 60 percent black? That's all we're asking.”¹⁸² As support for a predominantly black,

¹⁸⁰ Fuller, quoted in Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 171, emphasis in original.

¹⁸¹ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 364.

¹⁸² William Morder, “For Protestors it is North or Nothing,” *Milwaukee Courier*, September 8, 1979.

integrated North increased, “Fuller and the Coalition strategically merged community organizing and courtroom tactics to attain their objective, as Barbee and MUSIC had done years earlier.”¹⁸³ Like Barbee before him, Fuller would succeed with this strategy.

In order for Fuller to be successful, he had to win support from the school board that was responsible for the initial plan for North Division. His ability to succeed and thrive in all-black and all-white situations he had previously experienced became clear during this task. Doris Stacy, a liberal school board member at the time of the fight to save North Division, “praised Fuller for his demeanor in presenting the Coalition arguments before the Board,” and credited him with being able to earn “begrudged respect from even the conservatives on the board.”¹⁸⁴ Fuller’s experience in navigating different worlds had made him a pluralist, and he told Jonathan Coleman, “I’ve never had a problem being in all white (sic) situations, even when I went to Carroll. I have lived in Black communities in Durham, in Greensboro. I was perfectly comfortable with that situation. It didn’t harm my interaction with white people any way because that was still at both an individual and a business level... I think it ought to be possible for there to be diversity without people have to give up their sense of themselves in order to deal with each other in a real fashion.”¹⁸⁵ Fuller’s belief that blacks could retain their identities while working with and amongst whites would be an integral part of his activism in Milwaukee. His willingness to work alongside anyone who shared his goals, and his

¹⁸³ Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 176.

¹⁸⁴ Scott Anderson, “Triple O Disappointment, Coalition Victory—Two Stories of Struggle,” *Milwaukee Courier*, July 5 1980.

¹⁸⁵ Howard Fuller, interview by Jonathan Coleman (transcript), January 18 1993, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 8, Tape 138, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 28.

unwillingness to work with those who placed their self-interest ahead of those goals underscored his commitment to providing quality education to black children.

As school desegregation plans all over the country were disproportionately burdening black students and families, black activists began to “redefine the popular meaning of *Brown v. Board* to address the context of their particular struggles.”

According to Jack Dougherty, these activists

came to see the same conclusion reached in 1978 by Robert Carter, a leading attorney with Thurgood Marshall in the *Brown* trial. Looking back over twenty-five years of litigation, Carter recalled that the NAACP’s major challenge in 1954 was to destroy the “separate but equal” doctrine of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. To do so, Carter and his colleagues “fashioned *Brown* on the theory that equal education and integrated education were one and the same,” thereby equating the two concepts. But after their initial legal victory, the real target of their attack—racism—had changed over time, adapting itself to privilege white interests in school desegregation arrangements in several locations. While Carter personally continued to support integration, he eventually came to understand “the goal was not integration but equal educational opportunity,” thereby distinguishing between the two concepts he had fused together during the 1950s. Once Carter and other black education reformers had clarified these terms, they opened their minds to consider alternative strategies for reaching their goal.¹⁸⁶

Howard Fuller underwent a similar transformation. After fighting for integration in Cleveland in 1965, by 1979 he had shifted his outlook on how to effectively provide equal educational opportunity to low-income black students. His methods changed while his purpose remained the same, exhibiting his dedication to his race. In an interview conducted nearly fifteen years after the fight to save North Division, Fuller recognized his seemingly contradictory interests:

Interesting enough, the first time I got involved in a battle having to do with secondary schools was when I was in my final year of graduate school and, if we can think, that was during the period of the struggle for desegregation in the North...To show you how I’ve changed over the

¹⁸⁶ Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 169.

years, a decision had been made to bus kids into what was then Little Italy, and this was the first experience that I had with intact busing, because they were busing the kids... they were going to build a school in Glenville, and we were protesting that if they built the school there, it was going to be all-black, and so that's why we were laying down at the site, to prevent them from building a building there. This was likely my first exposure to struggle, but interesting enough, it was around integration, so then when you roll the clock forward to '76, the battle around North Division was in essence the opposite, although it was not to create an all-black school, it was to create a predominantly black school, and we were arguing that is still an integrated school.¹⁸⁷

In exploring this shift further, Fuller explained that during the 1960s he thought that integration, simply having black students in the same room with white students, meant equal access: that if black children were in the same school as white children they would have to have the same opportunity, "Now I know a lot more. I didn't know about tracking, all the ways that kids can be destroyed even though they're sitting in the same room."¹⁸⁸ Tracking occurs after standardized test results are used to separate students by their perceived abilities. According to urban education researcher Cassandra A. Simmons, "Standardized testing and curriculum tracking deal the most devastating blows in the resegregation of minority students. Judged inferior by overreliance on the results of inappropriate tests, disproportionate numbers of minority children are separated into so-called special education or compensatory education curriculum tracks. Once so placed, these children do not receive the academic training necessary to overcome whatever educational deficiencies they may actually have."¹⁸⁹ Fuller saw the separation of black students because of tracking in Durham, which did not result in the equal access Fuller and other integrationists hoped it would. Fighting for one approach to providing access

¹⁸⁷ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 2.

¹⁸⁸ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 8.

¹⁸⁹ Cassandra A. Simmons, "Education Components," in *Metropolitan Desegregation*, ed. Robert L. Green (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 74.

and opportunity to low-income black students in Cleveland, and then discovering that that approach was failing those children in Durham forced Fuller to reassess how to create actual opportunity in Milwaukee. For him, securing access to the new impressive North Division facility to neighborhood students was one way to do this.

Fuller and the Coalition were able to gain support “from the city’s two oldest (and sometimes rival) black organizations, the Milwaukee Urban League and the Milwaukee NAACP” by combining “the Urban League’s commitment to black communities and opportunity with the NAACP’s traditional focus on equity and integration.”¹⁹⁰ In November of 1979, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that the Monitoring Board assembled as part of the original settlement in the desegregation case found that, “The Milwaukee School Board should reconsider its plans for North Division High School and should permit all the present pupils at the school to graduate from there... the School Board’s plan impedes not only educational quality for the North pupils but also the equality of education for blacks.... the impact, not the intent, of the School Board’s decision clearly places an inequitable burden on black students and their parents.”¹⁹¹ Regardless of this critique, Marian McEvilly, the black school board member who proposed the initial plan for a new North, resisted the Coalition’s demands because of her integrationist stance, and the battle continued.

After the Monitoring Board recommended the adoption of the Coalition’s plan to the school board, the school board accused the Monitoring Board of abusing its power. The Wisconsin Magistrate was assigned the task of deciding whether or not the board did so, and on January 12, 1980 he delivered his decision that the panel did not “exceed [its]

¹⁹⁰ Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 177-178.

¹⁹¹ “Monitoring Board Objects to North Transfer Plans,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 17, 1979.

authority” and the school board should take the recommendation into account.¹⁹²

Increased pressure and support from the Coalition and the media forced the board to reconsider its position, and in April 1980 the Coalition won the battle to keep North open to neighborhood students.¹⁹³ This decision meant the high school would set an enrollment limit of 2,000 students, 60 percent of whom would be black.¹⁹⁴ It soon became clear to Fuller, however, that the disbanding of the Coalition after the victory for North Division did not mean his work was over: “Fuller soon learned a humbling lesson that many other black education activists had learned before him: winning one high-profile battle for school reform did not necessarily improve the actual quality of education for black students.”¹⁹⁵ North Division and other inner-city Milwaukee schools continued to decline in population, graduation rates, and literacy rates. This discouraging fact inspired Fuller to do more research, and commit more activism, underscoring his deep allegiance to the education of black children.

One difficulty Howard Fuller faced as a black activist leader in Milwaukee was appealing to varying schools of black political thought within the city. Fuller has explored this spectrum throughout his life from his own personal role in these divides. For Fuller, “there were two 60s. There was the Civil Rights 60s and there was the Black Power 60s. What we have to do is go back and understand what the links between all of those movements. Then we have to look at no matter what was happening then, what is

¹⁹² Scott Anderson, “Magistrate Upholds Panel’s Right to Say ‘No’ on North: Did Not Exceed Authority in North Division Findings,” *Milwaukee Courier*, January 12, 1980.

¹⁹³ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 377.

¹⁹⁴ Scott Anderson, “North Settlement Sets 2,000 Enrollment Limit, 60 percent Black,” *Milwaukee Courier*, May 10, 1980.

¹⁹⁵ Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 187.

the reality that we face now.”¹⁹⁶ When Fuller began teaching meetings at the old Commando headquarters for black students on the North side of Milwaukee in 1990, he said he started them “to get people to understand the trends in the development of African American history in this country... Malcolm X was very important to me. So was Frederick Douglass.”¹⁹⁷ In explaining trends in black activism, Fuller told his Commando classroom,

Those trends have been people who say we ought to go back to Africa, said if you go back to the Martin Delaneys of the world we have no business being here and our best thing is to get the hell out of here. Garvey, Delaney... You have Booker T. who comes up in the midst of everything and says Hey, what we gotta do is work with our hands, develop our own economic case and we should not be trying to unite with white people. We shouldn't be a threat to them, we don't need a vote, a whole bunch of stuff. And it was an accommodationist notion. Then you had DuBois saying what are you talking about? We need to be demanding the right to vote, we need to be demanding this, we need to be demanding that, we need to be demanding to be viewed as first class citizens like everybody else. This view that you're talking about we should just hang over here and work with our hands and stuff is not what we ought to be doing, okay? Then you have Malcolm who comes on the scene and gets tied back into really a lot of what Garvey was talking about because if you trace Elijah Mohammad you go back to Garvey. Garvey came to America to meet Booker T. That's why he came here. Because he read up on slavery and was impacted by Booker T's views. Then you have Martin Luther King. So all I'm trying to say is even when you get a discussion about black colleges those black colleges were part of various trends of thought.¹⁹⁸

Howard Fuller's understanding that divisions within the black community were not new allowed him not to be overwhelmed or discouraged by the divisiveness of his own community. Instead this understanding allowed him to effectively create coalitions

¹⁹⁶ Howard Fuller, interview by Jonathan Coleman (transcript), June 27 1991, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 1, Tape 15, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 5.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Howard Fuller at Commando meeting, May 2 1992, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 7, Tape 107, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 4.

and work for change. Fuller's next coalition would grow out of increased frustrations with police brutality. On July 9th, 1981, Ernest Lacy, a 22 year old black man, died in police custody after being mistaken by three white Milwaukee police officers for a rape suspect.¹⁹⁹ After inquiries into the officers' past, including previous instances of violence, Howard Fuller and Black Panther Militia leader Alderman Michael McGee came together to form the Coalition for Justice for Ernest Lacy. While Michael McGee used his political power to call for radical, sometimes even violent demonstrations to facilitate change, Fuller was someone whom black and white constituencies were willing to work with. Although Fuller did not agree with some of McGee's aggressive tactics, putting those differences aside in order to gain justice for Ernest Lacy shows his willingness to work with any individuals fighting to uplift the race. Through the desegregation and community control reforms discussed above it is clear there has never been a unified voice representing the black community's approach to education in Milwaukee. These divides were something Fuller would have to grapple with, especially when appointed superintendent. Trying to work with all of these different factions in hopes of providing educational opportunities for low-income blacks was an effort that would leave Fuller "little personal time, little sleep, health problems, and two failed marriages" which was, "in his opinion...the price you paid for being a race man."²⁰⁰

When reflecting on his activism with North Division and Ernest Lacy, Fuller told historian Jack Dougherty, "I have always felt, based on my history of the struggle, if you just have, we did the same thing with Lacy... If you just have one thing, that people are

¹⁹⁹ James Romenesko, "Rape Suspect, 22, Dies in Police Custody," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 10, 1981.

²⁰⁰ Jonathan Coleman, *Long Way to Go: Black and White in America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), 42.

just out in the street, you have no other avenue, no other points of leverage, unless you can effect people in some way, they'll leave you out in the streets forever, if they just decide they can put up with you.”²⁰¹ Fuller took the same combined approach of on-the-ground activism and the courts that he used for the struggle to save North Division as he did for Ernest Lacy. This double-pronged approach won the Lacy family a \$500,000 settlement from the Milwaukee Police Department. More influential, however, was that according to journalist Tom Bamberger, “the Lacy protest provided the impetus for the 1984 legislative restructuring of the police department.”²⁰² Seeing this type of activism succeed, in 1982 Fuller told another Milwaukee journalist, Kevin Merida, that what was most needed in the black community were two political organizations: one to bring people to the polls and one to bring them to the streets. He continued, “Anybody with any sense knows that blacks in Milwaukee are politically impotent, period... if you're even relatively honest, you'd have to admit that. That while people give lip service to black people around election time, no one seriously worries about the black community.”²⁰³ Although Fuller was willing to work with white politicians whom he saw as agents for uplifting his race, he was keenly aware this goal might not be their first priority. Fuller took every opportunity he could to raise awareness and make black Milwaukeeans a priority, from Milwaukee to Madison and back again. Fuller went from working at Marquette until 1983 to a position in the Wisconsin Department of Employment Relations until 1986 followed by a two-year stint as dean at the Milwaukee Area Technical College.²⁰⁴ During this time, Fuller earned his doctorate from Marquette University with a dissertation entitled “The

²⁰¹ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 11.

²⁰² Bamberger, “The Education of Howard Fuller,” 39.

²⁰³ Merida, “Howard Fuller: 60s Activist Still Active.”

²⁰⁴ “A Difference, ‘But Not Enough’ Dedicated to Fighting for Change, He Leaves in Frustration,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 25, 1995.

Impact of the Milwaukee Public School System's Desegregation Plan on Black Students and the Black Community (1976-1982).”²⁰⁵

After the fight for justice for Ernest Lacy had “dominated public conversation in the black community” for two years, Howard Fuller and Michael McGee, now very public figures in the black community, “used this newly acquired platform to launch subsequent dissent, Fuller focusing on education and McGee on the economic plight of black Milwaukeeans.”²⁰⁶ According to Bill Dahlk, during his time with the Lacy coalition, “Fuller reached an important point in his approach toward reform. Declaring ‘there’s got to be some of us inside the system.’”²⁰⁷ While much of Fuller’s activism had been tied to his outsider status, his continued success of combining on-the-ground activism and working within the legal system led him to try to work for change on the inside. While many black activists during this time were assessing the effects of desegregation, discontent for the program continued to rise. Three years of desegregation had resulted in many inner-city, predominantly black schools closing, with black students being disproportionately bussed further and further away from their homes in order to foster desegregated schools. While desegregation was not producing the desired effects of its implementation, “by 1982, some integrationists were ready to push for metropolitan school integration as the answer.”²⁰⁸ Fuller saw the negative effect desegregation of MPS was having on the black community and decided to enter into political office in order to expose the inequalities happening at the municipal level, and ultimately to stop them from spreading to the metropolitan area as a whole.

²⁰⁵ Howard Fuller, “The Impact of the Milwaukee Public School System’s Desegregation Plan on Black Students and the Black Community (1976-1982)” (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 1985).

²⁰⁶ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 383.

²⁰⁷ Ibid..

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 394.

As black populations became more concentrated in urban areas throughout the 1970s, “The National Task Force on Desegregation Strategies” concluded that, “the simple demographic fact is that many large city school districts cannot desegregate by themselves. For children in such districts, the best hope for attending a desegregated schools lies in the implementation of the metropolitan school desegregation strategies—i.e., desegregation plans which do not stop at the city line, but rather encompass at least some of the surrounding suburban areas.”²⁰⁹ A voluntary city-suburb transfer program (known as Chapter 220) had been in effect in Milwaukee since 1976, using a metropolitan approach to facilitate desegregation on a small scale. As this program was not having any meaningful effect on Milwaukee Public Schools’ racial makeup, in 1983 MPS looked toward broad metropolitan desegregation as the next step in trying to integrate schools, drawing mixed support from Milwaukee blacks and other integration advocates.

According to Bill Dahlk, “In October 1983, the MPS board voted to propose to twenty-nine suburbs that they join with MPS in planning for increased metropolitan school desegregation. The board proposed a substantial change: reorganization of the metropolitan school districts into one unified district. Its goal for MPS was to stabilize student enrollment at 45 percent white, 45 percent black, and 10 percent ‘other’ through equal two-way transfer... By December 1983, the MPS board recognized that reorganization into one district was a non-starter and replaced it with the goal of a number of smaller districts that would combine sections of MPS with groups of suburban schools.”²¹⁰ After much debate, in the spring of 1984 the MPS board proposed

²⁰⁹ The National Task Force on Desegregation Strategies quoted in Robert L. Green, “Desegregation,” in *Metropolitan Desegregation*, ed. Robert L. Green (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 16.

²¹⁰ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 395.

reorganizing MPS and “twenty-four suburban school districts into six new districts.”²¹¹ When the suburbs and state did not embrace the proposal, “the Milwaukee school board and the NAACP turned to a lawsuit on the grounds that the suburban schools and the state were deliberately contributing to segregation by rejecting the metropolitan-wide proposal.”²¹² As secretary of the Department of Employment Relations and a known Milwaukee activist, Fuller weighed in metropolitan desegregation with “the same criticisms he had used against MPS desegregation: ‘What you will have is a way of closing even more black schools and spreading the kids out even more without addressing the issues of quality education.’”²¹³

Fuller had wanted to get involved in politics at the state level because he saw an opportunity to have more of a direct positive impact on his people than he was having in Milwaukee. He told historian Jack Dougherty years later, “One of the reasons that I went to Madison that a lot of people never realized is that I felt that I had done, that I had no more leverage here, but that if I could go to Madison, that I could use my position there to convince the governor to do something.”²¹⁴ Democrat Anthony (Tony) Earl ran for governor in 1982 after incumbent Lee Dreyfus decided not to run for re-election. Fuller led Earl’s campaign within Milwaukee’s black community, and after Earl won the election Fuller’s reward was an appointment as “secretary of the Wisconsin Employment Relations Department, a role that enabled Fuller to build ties with governmental and business leaders, links that later enhanced his educational endeavors.”²¹⁵ Fuller went to Madison in order to “shift policy discussions from metropolitan desegregation to quality, effective

²¹¹ Nelsen, “Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools,” 147.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 401.

²¹⁴ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, p. 26.

²¹⁵ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 383-384.

MPS schools,”²¹⁶ which he could not do in Milwaukee. As it became clear that MPS was ready to begin a court battle for the desegregation plan described above, “Fuller made a significant proposal: he requested a moratorium on metropolitan desegregation discussions until December 1984 and called for Governor Anthony Earl... to create a special commission to study the effectiveness of MPS education and to develop plans for improving its quality and making desegregation more equitable.”²¹⁷ Fuller was not alone in his request. With MPS students’ achievement continuing to decline, “among state and Milwaukee area business and government officials, there was a growing concern that public schools, and especially MPS, were increasingly falling short in effectively preparing youth for both college and the workforce.”²¹⁸ As a result of these pressures, in June of 1984 “membership of the Governor’s Commission on the Quality of Education in Metropolitan Milwaukee (the Mitchell Commission) was announced,”²¹⁹ with Fuller serving on the panel, and “After nearly a year of research, the Mitchell Commission began releasing its findings in May of 1985.”²²⁰

According to Fuller, his goal in supporting the creation of the Mitchell Commission was to expose how the desegregation efforts within MPS had negatively and disproportionately affected the district’s black students. Trying to document the specific struggles his people were experiencing as a result of desegregation demonstrates Fuller’s commitment to providing quality education to black students rather than simply getting them into schools with white bodies. As he had seen in Cleveland and Durham, this mixing was not the way to solidify opportunity and he looked to the Commission’s report

²¹⁶ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, p. 26.

²¹⁷ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 401-402.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 421.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 424.

²²⁰ Ibid.

to show that. Fuller told Jack Dougherty that exposing desegregation's negative effects on black student performance called for the Mitchell Commission to specifically look at grade point averages by race of individual students. According to Fuller, Superintendent McMurrin had not done this for two reasons, "number one, he said that Black parents would not be able to deal with, when they saw this, they wouldn't be able to deal with what was actually happening... and two was that it would give racists, it would say to racists that you were right, that they couldn't learn. So therefore that's why we don't publish the data. I was enraged."²²¹ Fuller disagreed with McMurrin, explaining to Dougherty his philosophy that would he would follow from Governor Earl's administration to the superintendent's chair,

My view is that, and I had that view as superintendent, no matter what it is, you have to tell the truth, because you can't correct the situation by lying about the situation or hiding the situation, just like he was going to tell me, I don't know what I was talking about when I said there was a racial gap, two years later they began to, and this is in the document, they began to talk about gap schools, because we unmasked it through the commission, the gap that existed... You have to get people to face up to what is the reality in order to make a change. As long as you are in denial, how in the hell are you going to face up to what is to be done. Whatever the reason is for denial.²²²

The Mitchell Commission's report lent legitimacy to claims Fuller and other education reformers had been making for years. The results exposed "consistent under-performance of black students, whether city or suburban,"²²³ negative effects of poverty on performance, high black dropout rates, and an undeniable gap between white and black achievement. According to Bill Dahlk, "A year after the commission's report was first publicized, MPS' test scores for the 1985-86 year were released, indicating that the

²²¹ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 27.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Mitchell Commission Report, quoted in Dahlk, 424.

white-black gap was widening, after several years of gradual narrowing.”²²⁴ The results created the impetus for education reformers to further reject Milwaukee’s metropolitan desegregation plan and fight for a new strategy. Fuller used this as an opportunity to introduce different approaches to the MPS crisis, suggesting, “Now maybe we can start to talk about what must be done to address the problem. Now may be the time to talk about doing something totally different.”²²⁵ The commission’s findings led Fuller to write his dissertation about how MPS’ desegregation plan had unfairly impacted Milwaukee’s black community. He dedicated the project to “All of the Black children who have endured the practices of MPS over the years.”²²⁶

Fuller’s dissertation explored how the implementation of desegregation can be just as discriminatory as segregation. Fuller based his study on “a systematic analysis of information contained within two Milwaukee Public School System data sources: School Enrollment by Receiving School (1979, 1980, 1981, and 1982) and School Enrollment by Sending Attendance Area (1979, 1980, 1981, and 1982).”²²⁷ Fuller made a clear distinction between a desegregated school and an integrated school in the following way: a desegregated school “refers only to its racial composition,” making desegregation the mere mixing “of bodies without reference to the quality of the interracial interaction,” while an integrated school is “an interracial facility which boasts a climate of interracial acceptance... when the two groups share equal status.”²²⁸ This distinction has been made more and more in scholarly educational literature in the 21st century, as it has become

²²⁴ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 425.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Howard Fuller, “The Impact of the Milwaukee Public School System’s Desegregation Plan on Black Students and the Black Community (1976-1982).”

²²⁷ Ibid., 73-74.

²²⁸ Ibid., 5.

clear that many desegregation campaigns or desegregated schools do not provide interracial acceptance.²²⁹ The term “desegregation” has been used throughout this thesis, as it better describes the process in Milwaukee and other cities throughout the country. Fuller’s dissertation argues that the *Brown* decision, while meaningful and important to the history of black education in the United States, was based on racist assumptions.²³⁰ Fuller argued unequivocally that the burden of desegregation was placed on black shoulders, as his research found desegregation in MPS had “systematically bused black students out of their attendance areas, closed schools in the black community, and converted other black attendance area schools to specialty schools to which neighborhood students had no attendance rights.”²³¹ This, according to Fuller, left black students with “only one choice—to be bused to a school outside of their attendance area.”²³² For Fuller this “forced choice” did not result in quality education for black students, with the racist assumptions underlying the *Brown* decision to negatively affect black students’ educational opportunities. When reflecting on his dissertation, Fuller explained his point:

What I was trying to do in my dissertation really was to rethink why people were able to turn the *Brown* decision on its head, which is in essence what I think happened in Milwaukee, and it happened in a lot of other places. Looking at *Brown*, it ended up saying that black folks were pathological, and that in essence the only way for them to get cleansed was to leave their own community. The philosophical underpinning was racist. We had to fight that concept and in essence make the case that you could have a quality education, as I was calling it then, in a school that’s predominantly black, and that was a major leap for people to make.²³³

²²⁹ See Sonya Horsford, *Learning in a Burning House: Educational Inequality, Ideology, and (Dis)Integration*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011); Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: the Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005); and Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

²³⁰ Fuller, “The Impact of the Milwaukee Public School System’s Desegregation Plan on Black Students and the Black Community (1976-1982),” 11.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

²³² *Ibid.*, 148.

²³³ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 16.

While Fuller did not account for those black students who left their school district by choice, his work revealed a fundamental insight that would affect decisions he made about school reform from then on; even those individuals who exercised that choice were exercising a “forced choice,”²³⁴ hindering their role in their own education and limiting opportunity.

The Mitchell Commission’s findings along with Fuller’s research for his dissertation contributed to his increasingly nationalistic proposals for education reform. According to Bill Dahlk Fuller, “called for more African American teachers and administrators... He urged an expanded role in the curriculum for African American history and culture... He called for less busing and for returning black students to neighborhood schools.”²³⁵ His increasing concern for black students within MPS and commitment to providing them with education resulted in Fuller’s leaving Governor Earl’s administration in 1986, “to become dean of general education at Milwaukee Area Technical College because ‘he could not pass up the opportunity to return to Milwaukee and be involved in the education of black people.’ Earl accepted Fuller’s resignation and called his performance in the state job ‘nothing short of brilliant.’”²³⁶ The *Milwaukee Sentinel* also praised Fuller’s achievements saying, “The black activist turned employment relations secretary has demonstrated a mastery of public administration.” The article went on to describe some of his achievements, including reorganizing the department; pushing an “aggressive affirmative action campaign;” brokering a deal with the Wisconsin State Employees Union resulting in a “one-year wage freeze;” and

²³⁴ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 24.

²³⁵ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 402.

²³⁶ Jan Ubelherr, “Fuller has Followed Unexpected Turns In and Out of ‘The System,’” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 18, 1991.

winning “respect of friend and foe alike.”²³⁷ Fuller’s return to Milwaukee and increasingly nationalistic goals would lead him to support and propose a plan for a separate independent school district for “North Division and its surrounding feeder schools.”²³⁸

According to historian James K. Nelsen, “The people behind the plan believed a return to a neighborhood-based system of education would increase parent involvement, improve teacher morale, and encourage the development of a focused curriculum that would reduce the dropout rate... What they were really after were choices for African American families, choices that had not existed under the previous, segregated system.”²³⁹ While the group was not against integration, until integrated schools yielded more choices for blacks in Milwaukee, Fuller and his supporters argued that black students would be “better off attending their own schools, where they could participate in and benefit from their own community and unique American heritage.”²⁴⁰ In August of 1987, a group of black leaders in Milwaukee held a news conference to propose the development of “a largely black school district on the North side [of Milwaukee].”²⁴¹ State Representative Polly Williams told reporters that, “We must develop our own plan to educate our children since no one else seems interested in doing it.”²⁴² The group presented a manifesto of the proposed district that quoted W.E.B. DuBois, saying, “The Negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What he needs is education. What he must remember is that there is no magic either in mixed schools or in segregated

²³⁷ Gregory D. Stanford, “Fuller Off to Fast Start and Maintaining Pace,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 9, 1983.

²³⁸ Nelsen, “Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools,” 149.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Nelsen, “Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools,” 150.

²⁴¹ David I. Bednarkek, “Frustration Over Achievement Spurs Call for a New District,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 11, 1987.

²⁴² Ibid.

schools.”²⁴³ Proponents of the plan also stated that, “the metropolitan desegregation suit... offers no real hope for equal educational opportunity for the majority of students or for the equitable racial desegregation of public education in Milwaukee.”²⁴⁴

Proponents of the plan had “four primary objectives of the district”:

- A dramatic increase in students’ academic achievement
- A substantial reduction in the drop-out rate
- Increased parental and community involvement in the schools
- Increased excellence through increased parental choice²⁴⁵

At the news conference for the proposal, Polly Williams said she would introduce this proposal to the state legislature starting a debate between black Milwaukeeans over the separate district. This debate, according to Bill Dahlk, “divided the Milwaukee African American community into two distinct camps, one tending toward a nationalist orientation, willing to move outside MPS, and the other more mainstream, seeking to work within MPS.”²⁴⁶ Howard Fuller, when reflecting on this divide and how it affected black-led school reform in the latter half the twentieth century, said,

I think that it’s a reflection of how the goals and the objectives of the black movement shifted over time, you know, but the trends have always been there. There’s one trend been saying that we need to develop our own, and I don’t think that that’s just a school issue, that’s the black reality in America. So I think you can trace all of this stuff back to those two fundamental tensions that are there, and they rise and fall at different points in our history...those people who say we need to integrate, and those people who say we need to build up our own. And some of us try to merge the two, I mean like I talk about, I think you need to be demanding change in the public schools, but I think we also need to create schools outside of the public schools.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 478.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 482.

²⁴⁷ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 34.

Opponents of the proposal claimed that the new district would have a segregating affect on those schools, while proponents, like Fuller, argued that a small district would “encourage parental involvement in the school,” which was “one of the most important factors in student achievement.”²⁴⁸ Fuller also responded to critics of the proposal, telling the *Milwaukee Journal* that “We’re talking about creating a new school district that is no more separate than Shorewood is separate.”²⁴⁹ According to James K. Nelsen, support for the plan came from “State Representatives Annette (Polly) Williams and Spencer Coggs, Governor Tommy Thompson, and Assembly Speaker Tom Loftus. However, Hawthorne Faison, the acting superintendent after McMurrin’s retirement, rejected the proposal, and Milwaukee School Board President David Cullen vowed to challenge its constitutionality in court.”²⁵⁰ Despite the divided support, “The bill managed to pass the State Assembly on March 17, 1988, only to be killed 2 weeks later in the Senate.”²⁵¹

Despite the bill’s defeat in the Wisconsin State Senate, Fuller saw this fight as a victory: “you know while it failed, to me you have to see all of these things as sort of a continual movement. It failed, but it raised consciousness, it pushed certain other things, the school district, for example, in trying to react to it... I think all of those things had an impact, because it was long enough that people had to react to it, it wasn’t some weak thing.”²⁵² Mikel Holt, editor of the *Milwaukee County Journal*, one of Milwaukee’s black newspapers also saw the bill, despite its eventual defeat, as a positive development:

The failure of the North Division School District Plan did not discourage parents or Black leadership... the defeat invigorated and inspired them...

²⁴⁸ Kenneth R. Lamke, “Fuller Defends Plan for Inner City District,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 15, 1987.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, Shorewood is a northern suburb of Milwaukee.

²⁵⁰ Nelsen, “Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools.” 151.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty, 33.

Black parents and educational leaders had secured an unprecedented victory with the assembly approval... providing proponents with the belief that they were one step removed from a major victory. That thought was even more comforting given the fact that the North Division Plan had received support from both sides of the political aisle, including the governor.²⁵³

Fuller was back in the spotlight with the bill's debate and had received accolades from Governor Earl for his time with the Department of Employment Relations. In 1988, David F. Schulz ran for Milwaukee County Executive with a campaign promise to address minority issues. Schulz won the election, and when it came time for him to appoint the new director for the Department of Health and Human Services, Howard Fuller was his first choice.²⁵⁴

As director of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Fuller would be exposed to a myriad of problems directly affecting blacks in Milwaukee. This led him to see the struggles of low-income blacks in Milwaukee on a "problem continuum." Reflecting on the connection between his job at the DHHS and later as superintendent, Fuller told Jonathan Coleman,

I see the school system on the front end of that continuum. I see the DHHS on the back end of that continuum. And hopefully what you can do in this position [as superintendent] is to help stop more individuals from reaching the point that I saw them in when I was in my other job. It is two very important responsibilities. It is just a question for where on that continuum you are going to be. There has got to be a relationship between the system and the department in terms of how do we do work together to make sure that the school system changes so that it can teach kids and that those kids are coming in with some chance of being able to learn.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Holt, quoted in Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 487.

²⁵⁴ Editorial page, "Fuller Should Get Top Post at DHHS," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 25, 1988.

²⁵⁵ Howard Fuller, interview by Jonathan Coleman (transcript), June 27 1991, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 1, Tape 15, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee,

Fuller's sense of responsibility to be somewhere on that continuum amplifies his identity as a race man. While succeeding at every job he took, Fuller could have used his skills and connections to promote and advance himself. It is clear that his unwavering commitment to his people surpassed his desire for self-advancement. According to Bill Dahlk, "Fuller's leadership style was a decisive one. His performances in the Earl administration and at Health and Human Services indicated that he was willing to quickly use power to implement the reforms he thought necessary to get an institution moving in the right direction."²⁵⁶ In 1988, Fuller started a Youth Initiative program to provide job training for youth and parents, childcare, medical care, social services, intervention programs, and prevention programs.²⁵⁷ In April of 1989 he proposed a safe house for victims of child neglect and abuse that became a reality in February of 1990,²⁵⁸ and that same year he started an alcohol and drug abuse treatment program called "Fighting Back."²⁵⁹ These initiatives, which showed Fuller's commitment to Milwaukee's underserved population, combined with his successes in grassroots organizing and later in Governor Earl's administration, caused the Milwaukee School Board to consider Fuller a viable candidate to head the school system in need of change.

The years leading up to Howard Fuller's term as superintended are important in understanding the reform climate he would come to operate within. Robert Peterkin was appointed as the first black superintendent of MPS in 1988, brought in from Cambridge

²⁵⁶ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 559.

²⁵⁷ Marilyn Marchione, "\$3 Million Plan to Help Nurture Poor Children," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 1, 1990.

²⁵⁸ Barbara Miner, "Haven is Ready to Shelter Littlest Victims," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 4, 1990.

²⁵⁹ Daniel P. Hanley Jr., "Drug Fight Centers on City Target Area: County gets \$200,000 for Battle," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 20, 1990.

Massachusetts on a platform of change.²⁶⁰ According to Bill Dahlk reformers on the school board had three major goals for his appointment: “narrow the white-black achievement gap, decentralize decision-making, and alter the inequitable desegregation scheme which included one-way busing and far-flung busing patterns.”²⁶¹ Peterkin looked to make these changes from within the system, implementing a decentralization plan that “kept MPS intact but divided it into six sub-districts.”²⁶² In February of 1990, Peterkin revealed “The Long-Range Educational Equity Plan for Milwaukee Public Schools,” which the *Milwaukee Journal* reported “streamlines and simplifies student assignment, but also is designed to simultaneously,”

- Improve the district’s least-successful schools.
- Reduce busing, particularly for black students, and consequently reduce the district’s transportation costs.
- Give parents more choice in selecting the schools their children attend.
- Desegregate a group of virtually all-black Inner City schools.
- Increase the number of students attending schools in their own neighborhoods.²⁶³

Peterkin brought in Harvard researcher Charles V. Willie to help develop the plan, which divided the school district into two zones. Parents would have the ability to send their children to any school in their zone that had room. Schools would have to be desegregated, and Willie placed that burden on the individual school: “it would be up to individual schools to find ways to make themselves attractive to a racially diverse population. Schools that failed to do so would come under the scrutiny of a Zone

²⁶⁰ Priscilla Ahlgren, “Peterkin Aims High: Community Can Help All Students Succeed, He Says,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 7, 1988.

²⁶¹ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 493.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Priscilla Ahlgren, “School Plan: Less Busing, More Choice,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 11, 1990.

Coordinating Board and would be targeted for immediate improvement.”²⁶⁴ Black Milwaukeeans were divided on support for the plan, with some criticizing it for not reducing the actual number of black pupils being bused. Willie responded that, “even if Milwaukee did not have to integrate its schools, about 19,000 black schoolchildren would still have to be bused out of their neighborhoods because of overcrowding.”²⁶⁵ After months of debate, “Peterkin had heard enough criticism of the Willie Plan by both parents and school board members to discard most of it.”²⁶⁶ As change from within the system failed, frustrated outsiders looked towards another way to actually improve educational opportunities for low-income blacks in Milwaukee.

While the educational nationalist movement had made headway with the new North Division District initiative in 1987, the fact that it did not pass the senate led these reformers to look for other educational opportunities outside of MPS. Their next major effort was supporting the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, a voucher plan. School vouchers take the state funds allocated for students in public schools and allow parents to use that money to pay private school tuition. Black students’ tumultuous relationship with MPS garnered support for the program, which was being pushed foremost by Republican Governor Tommy Thompson. In January of 1988, one thousand Wisconsin residents were surveyed about their position on the school voucher issue. According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, “Forty-eight percent of those surveyed favored a tax-supported voucher system that would let poor families choose among public, private or parochial schools. In Milwaukee, 59% of those surveyed supported the idea and 39% opposed

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Priscilla Ahlgren, “Schools Near Home a Tough Assignment,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 21, 1990.

²⁶⁶ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 500.

it.”²⁶⁷ Fuller supported the plan, telling reporters in 1989 that, “choice can be the savior of public education. The key to reforming the bureaucracy is progressive leadership and empowering parents at the bottom.”²⁶⁸ School choice will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4, and is not limited to voucher programs alone. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, however, focused on vouchers and had the following provisions:

- It was limited to families whose income did not exceed 175 percent of the MPS poverty level.
- The overall limit on the number of participants was 1 percent of the MPS district student population.
- It was limited to students who had not been in private schools the previous year.
- Choice students could not exceed 49 percent of a choice school’s enrollment.
- The voucher was limited to the amount of per-pupil state aid going to MPS.
- If the number of applying students exceeded the number of seats, the choice school had to select the students by lottery.
- The recipient schools had to be nonsectarian private schools and had to meet general state academic standards.
- The performance of the choice schools would be evaluated periodically under the direction of the state Department of Public Instruction.²⁶⁹

The bill passed in March of 1990, with state representative Polly Williams celebrating that for the first time, poor black Milwaukeeans would have the chance to send their children to quality private schools.²⁷⁰

Howard Fuller had gained respect from influential white Milwaukeeans as a result of his time in Governor Earl’s administration as well as heading the DHHS. When Robert Peterkin resigned from the superintendence, Howard Fuller’s name began circulating as his possible successor. In November 1990, the *Milwaukee Journal* ran an article

²⁶⁷ “School Vouchers Split Respondents,” *Milwaukee Journal*, January 18, 1988.

²⁶⁸ Fuller, quoted in Dahlk, *Against the Wind* 521.

²⁶⁹ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 523-524.

²⁷⁰ “School Choice Empowers Poor, Lawmaker Says,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 23, 1990.

describing five possible candidates. The *Journal* described Howard Fuller as, “a black Milwaukeean with a deep interest in education and a long track record of commitment to the city, Fuller probably would bring to the job the strong administrative skills that helped him reorganize what is perhaps the county’s most unwieldy department. His other characteristics: an activist nature, pluralistic vision, and passion for social justice and positive change.”²⁷¹ While support for Fuller was not universal from white or black Milwaukeeans, in February of 1991 the *Milwaukee Journal* reported that, “An effort is quietly afoot to draft Howard Fuller as Milwaukee’s next school superintendent.”²⁷² State law in Wisconsin during this time, however, required “all school administrators have at least three years of classroom teaching experience at the elementary or secondary level.”²⁷³ While Fuller had taught extensively at the university level, his appointment as superintendent would require an exemption from the state law. The situation in Milwaukee’s schools, however, had become dire enough that making the effort to change the law giving Fuller a chance at turning around Milwaukee Public Schools was worth it. While Superintendent Robert Peterkin had not successfully reformed MPS as the board had hoped, they turned to Fuller as the next possibility for someone who could facilitate real change.

During the discussion of possible superintendents, an editorial in the *Milwaukee Journal* reported that Milwaukee deserved Fuller as a choice for superintendent and claimed that Fuller “more than fit the bill.” The article listed the following reasons for Fuller’s endorsement:

²⁷¹ “Here’s Background of Some Possible Candidates,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Sunday November 25, 1990.

²⁷² Jim Stingl, “Fuller is Pushed for Top Job, but He Couldn’t be Superintendent Without Change in State Law,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 22, 1991.

²⁷³ Ibid.

- He has demonstrated a passionate concern for the children of this community, particularly those who, because of color or family income, have the education deck stacked against them.
- He is committed to Milwaukee and Wisconsin, having lived and worked here for much of his life. There's little reason to fear that Fuller would be chasing a job elsewhere in two to three years.
- Because of his familiarity with the school system, Fuller wouldn't need much of a break-in period. That's important in a district where the momentum for reform has stalled.
- He has held a variety of top administrative positions at both the state and local levels, earning a great deal of respect along the way.²⁷⁴

Other articles in the *Journal* and *Sentinel* discussing Fuller's possible appointment included the following supportive statements and endorsements:

- "The fact is, the district doesn't need a teacher. It needs a leader, and there no other candidate can match Fuller's passion for a better Milwaukee, his belief in the power of learning and his commitment to doing his share. Why not take him from running welfare, where he catches the victims of a sometimes-mean society, and put him on the front where fighting is fiercest?"²⁷⁵
- "The right person at the right time for a tough job."²⁷⁶
- "He has deep roots in the community; he has performed admirably in a variety of public-sector management positions; he has repeatedly demonstrated his concern for children, particularly with respect to their schooling. Clearly, Fuller comes with a lot of pluses."²⁷⁷
- "In his career in public administration, he has piled up a record of success in areas where prospects looked bleak... time and again he impressively achieved what many said couldn't be done."²⁷⁸

Opponents of Fuller also voiced their opinions on why he was not the man for the job.

These frustrations ranged from changing the teaching requirement to suspicion of support

²⁷⁴ "Fuller Offers Another Option," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 26, 1991.

²⁷⁵ Dennis McCann, "Look No Further: It's Fuller," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 1, 1991.

²⁷⁶ Jeff Bentoff, "Ament Endorses Fuller for MPS Superintendent," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 27, 1991.

²⁷⁷ "Fuller Belongs on the List," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 1, 1991.

²⁷⁸ "Fuller's Qualities and Success Just Might Help Rescue MPS," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 3, 1991.

from white business and governmental leaders as a result of his time with Governor Earl and the DHHS:

- “The process should not be tampered with for anyone.”²⁷⁹
- “For those whites who have stated that Dr. Howard Fuller should be selected because he is a role model and because he has a passionate commitment to education, we say there are thousands of citizens in the black community who have those characteristics. Would Milwaukee businessmen advocate for the lowering of standards for Dr. Fuller to become superintendent of the Whitefish Bay or Shorewood public school systems?”²⁸⁰
- “Dr. Fuller is not for the black community. He is for Dr. Fuller.”²⁸¹
- “I’m concerned with his preoccupation of looking for other occupations.”²⁸²

In response to the last criticism, Fuller publicly described his strategy of working a job until he became ineffective and willingness to change jobs in order to continue his work of fighting for opportunities to low-income blacks. Fuller told the *Milwaukee Journal*, “If you don’t move, you don’t have the breadth of experience to take certain jobs. Each time I moved, I moved upward, and it gave me a broader experience base... How do you work for a community in the absence of being somewhere? I’ve never been a careerist. I’ve always thought about how I can use my skills to work for the community.”²⁸³ Fuller’s foremost commitment was to his community and he consistently showed a willingness to embrace opportunities that allowed him the chance to uplift and liberate his race.

The school board was ready for the next superintendent and urged state lawmakers to vote on legislation that would remove the classroom-teaching requirement

²⁷⁹ Paula A. Poda, “Changing Rules for Fuller Opposed,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 14, 1991.

²⁸⁰ “Fuller’s Bid Denounced by Coalition NAACP, 5 Church Groups Attack His Candidacy for Superintendent,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 14, 1991.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Cary Spivak, “Four Jobs Since ’77: Fuller Effective, but Can’t Sit Still,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 25, 1991.

²⁸³ Manuel Mendoza, “Fuller’s Broad Appeal Isn’t Attractive to Everyone: He Lays Out Plan for Saving the City Through its Schools,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 18, 1991.

in order to open up the position to Fuller.²⁸⁴ The *Milwaukee Journal* reported that, “Legislation that would make Howard Fuller eligible for the job of Milwaukee school superintendent appears to have broad support in the Legislature,”²⁸⁵ including Governor Tommy Thompson’s support. Thompson told reporters that Fuller, “has taught at the university, taught in vocational schools, [but] he has not taught in the K-12 classroom... Therefore, he’s not qualified to be superintendent of schools. I think it’s a ridiculous law in Howard’s case.”²⁸⁶ On April 17, 1991 the Wisconsin Senate passed a bill that would permanently “exempt Milwaukee Public Schools from a state requirement that the superintendent have three years of teaching experience,”²⁸⁷ and on May 17, 1991 the school board appointed Howard Fuller as superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools.²⁸⁸

According to Bill Dahlk, when Howard Fuller took office,

The sense of crisis regarding MPS and central city youth was probably at a historic high... Drug and crime epidemics were unabated; Milwaukee homicides, which included a disproportionate number of blacks, had risen from 78 in 1988 to 165 in 1990. The Milwaukee black unemployment rate was around 20 percent. More than half of MPS students were poor enough to qualify for free or reduced schools lunch. The MPS “report card” looked dismal: only about 40 percent of MPS ninth graders (and 33 percent of black ninth graders) were graduating in four years and only 7 percent of *those* had a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or better.²⁸⁹

Fuller’s first decision in office was eliminating the six-district structure discussed above that he had previously supported. The plan had not effectively decentralized schools and the *Sentinel* reported, “Fuller said the district should not continue with two layers of

²⁸⁴ “Get Going on Superintendent,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 27, 1991.

²⁸⁵ “Fuller Bill on Fast Track to Passage,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 12, 1991.

²⁸⁶ Richard P. Jones, “Hurdle to Fuller’s Candidacy About to fall: Thompson Confirms He Will Sign Bill,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 19, 1991.

²⁸⁷ Richard P. Jones, “Senate Approves Waiver for Fuller,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 18, 1991.

²⁸⁸ Priscilla Ahlgren, “Board Chooses Fuller as Superintendent,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 18, 1991.

²⁸⁹ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 558, emphasis in original.

management ‘on top of the schools we are trying to empower.’”²⁹⁰ A month into his tenure, Fuller promised the school board a plan within six months that would spell out how he intended to improve MPS. He had the following objectives:

- A “system of schools” where parents and teachers make the decisions and are held responsible for student achievement.
- A staff of central office administrators who understand that their jobs exist to work for school staffs and students.
- Major revisions in personnel and budgeting processes that hinder reform.²⁹¹

Fuller’s goals would decrease the power and influence of teachers’ unions and administrators, decentralizing that power and shifting it to parents and principals. These threats would eventually cause some Milwaukee teachers to reject Fuller’s plans and accuse him of being anti-teacher. This relationship would eventually hinder Fuller from making the changes he saw as necessary for reforming MPS.

In a speech to the Rotary Club in August of 1991, Fuller spelled out his goals as superintendent. Catering to his audience, Fuller used language and rhetoric that would appeal to the Rotarians:

We have to say unequivocally that our goal is going to be to graduate students who can read, who can write, who can compute, who can analyze and who can think at higher levels... I believe that people respond to incentives, that organizations that provide incentives are more successful than those who do not. Without incentives for success and consequences for poor performance organizations and individuals have no impetus to change. That’s a fact... We have to secondly create a system of schools with characteristics that promote incentives and says that high performance is something that we value. The third thing we have to do is provide them rewards for positive performance and consequences for lack of success... We need incentives and rewards that mean something. To produce them I think that one we must allow dollars to follow the students... in the organization that I will be proposing successful schools

²⁹⁰ Paula A. Poda, “Fuller Plan Shocks Regional Office Staffs: Board Members Want more Details on Elimination of Management Layer,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 18, 1991.

²⁹¹ “Fuller Ready to Give Power to Schools, if They’re Ready,” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 20, 1991.

will attract parents, children, and funding. Unsuccessful schools will face the consequence of reduced funding. Our budget process leads to fixed and equitable dollar amounts to each student and allows these funds to flow to those schools which attract students. We need to give principals the tools which they need to manage schools. MPS principals do not hire the staff and faculty, they do not develop and control their budgets. Few of you would want to be a manager in an organization where you have no control of anything but somebody told you you were accountable. We have to in fact move to give people authority, give them power and then hold them accountable for results. This will require the board, the administration, and you to transfer power and authority to schools and specifically principals.²⁹²

In this speech Fuller also said Milwaukee needed to treat parents and students as “customers,” and that he believed the school board was also committed to making MPS a system of schools with site-based management, allowing principals to oversee and subsequently be held accountable for the performance of their schools. While Fuller’s tone may have shifted due to relationships with certain business interests he cultivated while in Madison, resources explaining these relationships were not available for this thesis. While Fuller’s other philosophical shifts had been directly related to life experience, it can be assumed that this gap in information would be helpful in understanding Fuller’s business oriented strategy that is demonstrated in this speech.

In August of 1991 the first clash between Howard Fuller and the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association (MTEA) would come from an unexpected source: a student with a hidden camera. An NBC investigative program, “Expose,” gave a North Division High school student a hidden camera to capture life at the school. According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, the video displayed students playing dice in a class with the teacher present, a teacher reading silently while their students misbehaved, and one

²⁹² Howard Fuller, Speech to Rotary Club, August 6, 1991, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 3, Tape 38, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2-3, 11-12.

teacher telling students to “pretended they were reading,” among other “disturbing” segments. Fuller suspended three teachers featured on the tape without pay and scheduled emergency misconduct meetings.²⁹³ Fuller was not shy in his criticism of those teachers, saying, “My view quite blatantly is that people have given up, and if they can’t teach these kids, then we need to get someone who can.”²⁹⁴ Teachers believed they were being unfairly judged and pointed to the schools and students as the impetus for this kind of behavior. When the school board decided to extend one teacher’s unpaid suspension for the remainder of the school year, Don Ernest, executive director of the MTEA said, “The MTEA is totally committed to defending due process of all its members... The MTEA is not going to let any members be unfairly treated and unjustly penalized.” Fuller showed his commitment to making teachers accountable and responded, “I will continue to make judgments based on what I see at the time I see it... Whatever it takes to function in the interest of our children, I think we should do it.”²⁹⁵ Members of the Milwaukee community not affiliated with MPS backed Fuller’s decision while teachers and MTEA representatives publicly criticized him.

The strain between Fuller and the teachers and their union worsened when Fuller began lobbying for the power to close failing schools; “under Fuller’s failing-school proposal, a school could be closed for having poor academic performance or an inadequate learning environment, and reopened under new administrative leadership and perhaps a new teaching staff.”²⁹⁶ MTEA president Michael Langyel called this proposal

²⁹³ Priscilla Ahlgren, “NBC Tape of Behavior at North Division Outrages Fuller,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 23, 1991.

²⁹⁴ Paula A. Poda, “Teacher in Video Vents His Anger: Says He Now ‘Hates’ Fuller,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 4, 1991.

²⁹⁵ Priscilla Ahlgren, “Teacher on Videotape Suspended; Appeal Planned,” *Milwaukee Journal*, November 7, 1991.

²⁹⁶ “Fuller’s School-Closing Plan Draws Fire,” *Milwaukee Journal*, December 17, 1991.

“a slap in the face,” claiming “it gives the impression that they [teachers] are the primary cause of the educational problems in MPS.” Fuller defended the proposal saying, “I don’t see this as teacher-bashing... We’re trying to create a variety of different options to educate kids.”²⁹⁷ This drive to create options would drive a wedge between Fuller and the MTEA that would eventually lead to his resignation.

Fuller proposed other reforms that were also met with immediate criticism in his attempt to provide quality education for low-income blacks in Milwaukee. In February of 1992, Fuller “proposed a ten-year building and facility-expansion plan to solve serious problems of overcrowded schools, overly large class sizes, too much busing, and deferred facility maintenance... He proposed building fifteen new schools and expanding fourteen existing ones. The total cost would be \$474 million, of which \$366 million would be financed by long-term borrowing. This would necessitate approval through a voter referendum.”²⁹⁸ Fuller hoped to garner support for his expansion plan by showing Milwaukee taxpayers that the staff of MPS was committed to the plan and called for a one-year pay freeze. According to Bill Dahlk, “This would enable the district to actually reduce the school property tax for the year and potentially increase voter support for MPS.”²⁹⁹ The *Milwaukee Journal* reported that, “Langyel called the idea of a freeze an insult to teachers,” and quoted him saying, “Teachers are overwhelmingly opposed...I’m supremely confident that our position represents the vast majority of our members.”³⁰⁰ In discussing the plan with his Saturday morning class, Fuller claimed that,

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 564.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 565.

³⁰⁰ Priscilla Ahlgren, “Many Teachers Back Pay Freeze Over Loss of Jobs,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 14, 1992.

I am not against teachers. I'm pro-teachers. I believe that you have to reduce class size. I think that is best for the kids because it will enable to the teacher to teach better. But how do you get the smaller class size? You have to build the new building. How do you get the new building? You have to go to the taxpayers and you have to ask them for more money. What do we have to do to stand a chance to win that? You have to show taxpayers that you are willing to do some things differently than we have been doing. So the teachers have to understand that unless they are willing to show flexibility in how we do things, you are never going to get a taxpayer to vote for a new school building. If you don't get new building, how are you going to reduce class sizes?³⁰¹

Howard Fuller had always found it intriguing that when it came to community problems, approaches to solve them were considered "throwing money at it," while putting money into other aspects of society was considered a "wise investment in the future."³⁰² Fuller hoped that his expansion plan could be viewed as the latter and focused his attentions on getting it passed.

Response to the plan was divided. Mayor John Norquist opposed the plan while the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce endorsed it. Community opinion ranged with some Milwaukeeans calling the plan necessary while others saw it as an unfair burden.³⁰³ State Representative Polly Williams was one of the most vocal opponents of the referendum, telling voters, "I am asking the voters throughout the city of Milwaukee to unite Feb. 16 and send a message to the board of school directors that enough is enough... Taxpayers have been giving them billions and billions of dollars over the years and student achievement has been getting worse and worse. Not only do

³⁰¹ Howard Fuller at Commando meeting, January 11 1992, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 5, Tape 84, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1.

³⁰² Howard Fuller, Speech to Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church, November 12 1992, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 5, Tape 84, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 12.

³⁰³ Priscilla Ahlgren, "Ament Backs Public Schools Plan," *Milwaukee Journal*, January 21, 1993, Dan Parks, "MPS Board Member O'Neil Alters Stand, Will Oppose Referendum," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 19, 1993.

they not deserve any more money, I think we deserve a refund.”³⁰⁴ Attempting to show the Milwaukee community that this referendum was a wise investment of the future failed: in February of 1993, “an unusually high voter turnout... resulted in a resounding defeat for Fuller’s plan by a three to one margin.”³⁰⁵

Fuller was quickly learning that being on the inside of MPS was not going to allow him to continue his work of uplifting his people by fighting for access to quality educational opportunities. He was living a lesson he had cautioned others about years earlier; “not long after Fuller had become head of Health and Human Services,” an acquaintance of Fuller’s “expressed some interest in working for Milwaukee County and Fuller told him that he shouldn’t delude himself into thinkin that ‘once you get into these positions, you’re gonna be able to change these people, because the bureaucrats won’t let you change them. They will fight you, they will sabotage you, they will do anything in the world just to maintain who and what they are.’”³⁰⁶ Fuller still chose to take the job as superintendent, and told the Milwaukee Rotarians at the beginning of his term,

I know there are people who are saying to me, “Howard, this will never work.” I will say to you, “It may not, but we’ll never know unless we try.” What we do know is what we have right now is not working. And I say to you that when we have something that is not working, don’t come to me talking about how something else will not work... I’m telling you that this is not going to be easy. This speech is infinitely easier than the task that’s going to be before us on this question... There are people in our system that believe that the system was created for their job. That they own the jobs. Not that this belongs to the community, but that it belongs to them. And we’re going to have to root all of that out... I know we’re going to have to wrestle with these issues, but I guess I believe deep down in my heart and my soul that our children are worth the effort.³⁰⁷

After two years on the job, however, that effort was taking its toll on Fuller.

³⁰⁴ Priscilla Ahlgren, “Vote ‘No’ on Schools: Williams,” *Milwaukee Journal*, January 28, 1993.

³⁰⁵ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 568.

³⁰⁶ Coleman, *Long Way to Go*, 204.

³⁰⁷ Fuller, quoted in Coleman, *Long Way to Go*, 194.

In an interview given in March of 1993, a month after his referendum had been voted down, Fuller was notably pessimistic compared to interviews given over the previous two years. When discussing his own basic problems associated with his position, Fuller cited the fact that he did not come up through the traditional MPS ranks as a possible weakness. While this status provided an advantage to him in that he was never committed to anyone within system, he had to “depend a lot more on other people for specific kinds of advice.” He also admitted that he could never “keep this kind of professional objectivity that you sort of need to survive in this job. I let too much stuff get to me. You can’t let every incident report that comes across your desk, for example, you get a zillion everyday... I’m just concerned that people are starting to accept this stuff as the way it is. I’m saying you can’t do that. We have to at least do something that says we don’t accept this or we’re going to try to do something about it and not just let it get woven into the urban lifestyle or whatever it is.” Fuller also discussed the fact that he was consistently honest about what was happening. That because he never had “any kind of careerage... I don’t want to be superintendent anywhere else,” he was willing to put everything out in the open, making him vulnerable to attacks and criticisms.³⁰⁸

When assessing the referendum defeat, Fuller cited taxes as the main reason it did not pass. Fuller claimed the tax issue was “steeped in... the ongoing issue that we’re going to have and that’s who goes to public schools.” When asked about Polly Williams’ efforts to squash the referendum, Fuller admitted, “I think the black middle class has been split. There’s tax issues, there’s jealousy issues, and there’s differences. I think a lot of

³⁰⁸ Howard Fuller, interview by Jonathan Coleman, March 21 1993, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 7, Tape 119, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 23.

the stuff for some people centers around me, my personality, who's going to be the head Negro in the city...Unfortunately, in our community, those personality splits have always been and they tend to split people."³⁰⁹ This sentiment is echoed in Jonathon Coleman's study of race in Milwaukee, where every black leader in Milwaukee seemed to have an opinion they were willing to publicly voice about Howard Fuller. Jerrel Jones, a radio host and prominent black in Milwaukee, did not trust Fuller because of their student days at North Division. Jones criticized Fuller for being "a goody-two shoes who mostly hung out with white girls." After Fuller received the job as superintendent Jones felt "disgust really, that whenever the city 'needs a nigger for something, they choose Howie.'"³¹⁰ James Cameron, founder of the Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, disagreed with Jones. According to Cameron,

Howard Fuller was good for *all* of Milwaukee... The thing of it is, the white people put him in thinking he's going to be a yes-man, and they're going to get the surprise of their life when they find out that he's not a yes-man, that they can't control him... He's not just there as a tokenism for black people. I want that understood. He is somebody that Milwaukee should be proud of. And they should work with him to help make this city better than it is. And the only way we're going to do it is through education.³¹¹

Fuller's splintered support was hindering his ability to institute real reform from the superintendent's chair. Fuller would have to decide if he could continue his work in that position or have a greater effect somewhere else.

In March of 1993 Jonathan Coleman asked Fuller what the highlights were of his first two years as superintendent. Notably disheartened, Fuller responded that, "It's hard

³⁰⁹ Howard Fuller, interview by Jonathan Coleman, March 21 1993, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 7, Tape 119, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 33.

³¹⁰ Coleman, *Long Way to Go*, 56, emphasis in original.

³¹¹ Coleman, *Long Way to Go*, 92.

for me honestly to see a whole lot that I can really point to as being positive.” Fuller expressed that turnover of superintendents was so frequent because,

Once you get into these positions, then you start running into the reality of all the bullshit that you have to deal with. It becomes a real question, how much you can actually do, even though you have a vision of what ought to be done. It’s getting it done... When you get in here you just get devoured with a whole bunch of stuff. Trying to stand above all of that, deal with it, negotiate it but at the same time do something real... We’re still in a lot of ways very factionalized. Maybe all cities are that way, but I know we’re seriously that way around issues of race. For example the black community, there’s no unity around it. There’s too many individuals that dominate the discussion and that makes it easier it seems to me for the white community just, “oh my god they don’t know what they want!” and just walk away.³¹²

Fuller suggested that if you looked at the problems on the macro level you would have to throw your hands up and walk away. He said to survive you “gotta look at the day to day and what you can do to make a dent in the problem.”³¹³

As the 1993 school year began, Fuller was in charge of system with “test scores, GPAs, dropout rates, and attendance,” which “remained unsatisfactory.”³¹⁴ The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute published a report in January of 1994 titled “Why MPS Doesn’t Work: Barriers to Reform in the Milwaukee Public Schools.” This document described “characteristics of effective organizations and schools... the history of MPS reform efforts and the organizational impediments to improvements,” and argued “that continued failure will result without fundamental change to the system.”³¹⁵ The document cited lack of school autonomy, lack of accountability, and MPS “bureaucracy and regulation” as the reasons why MPS was failing. The report concluded that,

³¹² Howard Fuller, interview by Jonathan Coleman, March 21 1993, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 7, Tape 119, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 35-45.

³¹³ Ibid, 46.

³¹⁴ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 569.

³¹⁵ “Why MPS Doesn’t Work: Barriers to Reform in the Milwaukee Public Schools,” *Wisconsin Policy Research Institute Report*, 7(1), January 1994, 3.

Serious reform must produce accountability for results by shifting control from MPS to those it purports to serve. This can be done by allowing parents to choose the schools their children attend and providing them the financial resources to do so. In the context of organizational behavior, this is not a radical prescription for reform. Rather, it is the norm. What is more unusual is the defense of a system demonstrating so clearly its inability to improve performance.³¹⁶

The scathing critique also asserted that, “Until MPS—with its inherent interest in protecting the status quo and resistance to real accountability—faces external pressure change, reform efforts will continue to fail.”³¹⁷ Fuller, who had supported the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, would look to the expansion of that program to provide the pressure that could help repair MPS. Shifting the focus of improving MPS through outside channels rather than inside the system led to his resignation as superintendent and mark the beginning of the rest of his life’s work as a fierce advocate for the expansion of school choice.

Fuller’s life since he returned to Milwaukee was inextricably linked to the advancement of his race. From the Educational Opportunities Program at Marquette, to the Coalitions for North Division and Ernest Lacy, to Governor Earl’s administration, the Department of Health and Human Services, and finally as superintendent of Milwaukee Public School, Fuller took every opportunity provided to him to broaden the positive influence he could have on his people. That sense of responsibility is the core of his identity as a race man. When discussing the divide of blacks in Milwaukee, and the question of what kind of responsibility blacks had to their people, Fuller told his Saturday morning class,

I would argue that every one of you ought to get the best education you can get, I want every one of you all to have the best quality of life that you

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 1.

can have for yourself as an individual. I would never argue to you you can't live wherever you want, but what I would say is whatever you do, if you gain knowledge or you gain "power" I would want to argue with you to uplift those of us who don't have it, so that in essence I'm tying you to the rest of the people. So I'm not allowing you then to say "I don't have a responsibility to them, I only have a responsibility to myself or to my family." That to me is what I would call a distinction between a race person who may be doing relatively well in the society materially, and someone who says "I'm going to get whatever I can get and as soon as I can get away from the rest of these niggers, I'm out of here and if I don't see another one in life its fine with me and don't call me if I have to do this and that cause I don't have to do nothing."³¹⁸

While the black community did not unanimously agree with his ideas, Fuller did not agree with how some members of the black community approached their race either.

Fuller made decisions on how to best advance his race based on his personal experience; continuing to use what worked and leaving behind what had not. This commitment would continue to influence his jobs and his activism long after his term as superintendent was over.

³¹⁸ Howard Fuller at Commando meeting, August 17, 1991, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 1, Tape 30, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM ULTIMATE INSIDER TO ULTIMATE OUTSIDER

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) that passed into law in April of 1990 provided vouchers to 1 percent of MPS' student population and limited their choices to non-parochial schools.³¹⁹ Milwaukee Public Schools' continuing decline throughout the 1990s created the impetus for reform activists to seek the expansion of this program as well as other avenues to expand school choice. This chapter will explain the school choice movement, with a special focus on Milwaukee and MPS. Fuller was the superintendent of a public school system while advocating for external challenges to that very system. His drive to effectively educate Milwaukee's black students and his inability to implement the change he sought within the system would return Fuller to his outsider status. This chapter will argue that Howard Fuller's commitment to expanding choice opportunities for low-income black families that had been consistently let down by the Milwaukee Public School system led him to resign as superintendent. Fuller's interpretation of his responsibility to the students of MPS and their best educational opportunities rather than to MPS itself caused him to undermine the school system he was leading. This chapter argues that his resignation was not giving up, but a refusal to perpetuate the status quo of MPS at the detriment of the education of his people. This chapter will follow Fuller's activism after leaving MPS through his return to an outsider of the system, broadening his influence and allowing him to fight for effective change.

The origins of the school choice movement can be traced back to 1955, when "Milton Friedman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist from the University of Chicago,

³¹⁹ Gretchen Schuldt, "School Choice Plan to Affect 1,000 in City," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 23, 1990.

proposed vouchers as a solution to the monopoly control of the educational enterprise.”³²⁰

Viewing the public educational system as “one school district operated by one school superintendent who reports to one school board,” Friedman argued that, “In such a system, inefficiencies run rampant, as public school administrators have few incentives to provide the best product at the lowest price.”³²¹ Applying free-market economic theory to education, this meant, “If parents can use publicly funded vouchers to cover tuition at the school of their choice, schools will be forced to compete for paying customers and hence will have reason to improve. Subjected to competitive pressures, the nation’s schools will enhance productivity, efficiency, and consumer satisfaction in the services they provide, just as the automobile, computer, banking, and retail industries have over the past several decades.”³²² Scholars have argued that applying market principles to a public good such as education will not yield those same results. According to educational policy researcher John F. Witte, “Supporters of choice are quick to praise competition. Make schools compete with each other and the schools from which all families can choose will be better. But where else has competition worked in our inner-city neighborhoods? Has it worked in housing? In grocery stores? In health care? In retail clothing? Most Americans take many things for granted in their communities that cannot be taken for granted in most inner cities in America.”³²³ Witte also acknowledged that this “market model of education has been promoted as an alternative to the nineteenth-century model of publicly defined, regulated, and assigned schools. That model significantly challenges the

³²⁰ William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington D. C.: Brookings Institutions, 2002), xi.

³²¹ Ibid., xi-xii.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ John F. Witte, *The Market Approach to Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5.

traditional institutional arrangements and is thus vigorously opposed by those dependent on the status quo.”³²⁴ This debate between proponents of choice and those attempting to maintain the status quo was waged in Milwaukee, with Howard Fuller leading those ready to challenge the educational institution that had failed low-income blacks for decades.

For reformers like Howard Fuller, school choice was a way to provide educational opportunities for victims of poor quality public schools. According to public policy researchers William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, the modern day argument for school choice “rests primarily on its potential for equalizing educational opportunities... the contemporary case for vouchers—as with other forms of choice—focuses on the provision of new schooling opportunities for low-income, disadvantaged families, especially those searching for a decent school within the inner core of major metropolitan areas.”³²⁵ By 1990 in Milwaukee, court-mandated desegregation had not effectively integrated the public schools. Black-nationalist reformers had recently failed in their attempt to create an all-black school district, and “Republican governor Tommy Thompson had introduced several voucher proposals in the legislature, only to see them fail in the face of opposition from teachers’ unions.”³²⁶ These interests converged and “Thompson and black leaders in Milwaukee found common ground in a law that allowed low-income families to receive vouchers to attend private secular schools.”³²⁷ Under this pilot voucher program,

The result was a very limited venture. To be eligible, families had to qualify for the federal food stamp program. The amount of the voucher

³²⁴ Ibid., 7-8.

³²⁵ Howell and Peterson, xiii.

³²⁶ Ibid., 30.

³²⁷ Ibid.

was limited to \$2,500, which families could not supplement with their own resources. Only secular private schools could participate, despite the fact that nearly 90 percent of the private schools in the city had a religious affiliation. No more than half of the student body attending any private school could receive a voucher. Initially, only 1 percent of the public school population in Milwaukee could participate in the program... If the number of applicants to a school exceeded the number of available spaces, the school was required to admit students by lottery.³²⁸

Fuller supported Thompson's choice bill when he began pushing it in 1987,³²⁹ and would continue that support throughout his superintendence.

After Fuller's building referendum defeat, he declared he would start meeting with "foes and allies alike" of the referendum to create a second plan for new facilities.³³⁰

According to Bill Dahlk he also, "continued to press for internal reform with several initiatives. Mandatory algebra for all ninth graders was introduced, as was a critical thinking component in the middle school curriculum. A lot of planning was done in preparing for a school-to-work program that Fuller considered another key reform."³³¹

Fuller's dedication to his work became clear when he was hospitalized in October of 1993 and diagnosed with sarcoidosis, a disease that is often misdiagnosed as pneumonia, which left Fuller "running out of energy, he had a dry chronic cough and he has lost 12 pounds."³³² Despite the hospitalization and subsequent recuperation Fuller did not slow down, and the *Milwaukee Journal* reported he seemed "a little skeptical that he will be able to pull himself away from the tensions of his job."³³³

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 514-515.

³³⁰ "Can Fuller Escape Same Fate?" *Milwaukee Journal*, March 3, 1993.

³³¹ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 568.

³³² Jerry Resler, "Fuller's Health 101: Superintendent's Mysterious Illness Baffled his Doctors," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 9, 1993.

³³³ Curtis Lawrence, "Ailing Fuller Eases Back into Busy, Tense Workplace," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 17, 1993.

In addition to his physical ailments, Fuller had become more depressed as his term as superintendent went on. He was realizing more and more how hard it was to change things from inside the system. At the start of the 1993-1994 school year, Fuller told Jonathan Coleman he was not as centered as he had been in earlier fights, for North Division, in North Carolina, and Ernest Lacy. Fuller admitted to experiencing some depression, which had started because of problems with the budget, and the referendum,

It was just very, very difficult. All of the symptoms of depression I think I had. Crying. Couldn't sleep. Couldn't eat... It is easier to wage revolution than it is to govern. When you're waging revolution you got a particular focus, you got a particular ideological perspective. Not that revolution is easy; I'm just saying that you're right. You know what you're doing. When you get in and start trying to govern, you can no longer have the narrowest view because you got to now deal with a whole bunch of other issues and realities... In Durham when I was younger I knew everything... I was right and they were wrong. You're in there fighting totally different battles. Once you get into the system at this level, it's a very different situation. Stuff is a lot grayer. I don't know if stuff is grayer because I'm grayer or because you have to see things differently. You have to look at where people are coming from in all of these different places.³³⁴

As it seemed the wind was being taken out of Fuller's sails, Coleman asked if he felt differently than when he took the job. Fuller replied, "Oh yea... I'm not totally convinced yet that it can't be reformed, but I'm a lot closer to thinking that than I was two years ago, just based on personal experience."³³⁵

As Fuller was becoming increasingly disillusioned with Milwaukee Public Schools, he looked towards an expansion of school choice in Milwaukee through charter schools to provide the opportunities he hoped for. Charter schools,

are public schools which receive a charter contract from a public authority to operate for a specified period of time, to provide students a particular

³³⁴ Howard Fuller, interview by Jonathan Coleman, August 18 1993, *Jonathan Coleman Papers 1976-1997*, Manuscript Collection 152, Box 8, Tape 139, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 20.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

educational program and achieve specified results, often as measured by standardized tests. Supported by President George W. Bush, former President Clinton, and Senator John Kerry, charter schools combine the best of public and private sector education. Like other public schools, charters are approved by public authorities, cannot discriminate in admissions, must offer special education, and must abide by public testing and financial accountability requirements. Yet charter schools “reinvent” public education, since like private schools, charters have substantial autonomy over their personnel, curricula, and schedules. Charter teachers and administrators are usually “at-will” employees rather than tenured civil servants. Charters often offer unusual curricula... and nonstandard schedules.³³⁶

In the spring of 1993, Governor Tommy Thompson proposed a budget containing “a controversial charter school experiment” that would “allow up to 10 school districts in the state to contract with private firms to educate children.”³³⁷ Thompson’s proposal allowed the charter schools to be “exempt from all public education laws except statewide assessments and school report cards,” and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that this proposal was drafted “because of urgings to Thompson by Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Howard L. Fuller.”³³⁸ The proposal was met with immediate criticism from both the Milwaukee Teacher’s Education Association and the Wisconsin Education Association Council (the state’s largest teachers’ union).³³⁹ MTEA president Michael Langyel charged that this was “not an attempt to get real school reform,” while Richard Collins, WEAC’s president said “It’s a way of keeping employees from organizing... It’s basically a way of privatizing education, and we have a problem with that.”³⁴⁰ The fact that responses from the local and state unions focused on their employment interests rather than the quality of education for low-income blacks helped to deepen Fuller’s

³³⁶ Robert Marant, Myron S. Kayes, and April Gresham Maranto, “Charter Schools and School Reform: What We Know and Where We’ll Go,” in *A Guide to Charter Schools* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006), 2.

³³⁷ Dan Parks, “Charter School Plan Irks Teachers,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 8, 1993.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

mistrust of their commitment to the students they were hired to serve. Fuller's commitment to those students, and his people, are clear in his defense of the charter school proposal and refusal to bend to the union's demands. "The legislature passed such a law in 1993, but it was limited: it allowed MPS to constitute only two charter schools but they would have to be existing MPS schools and they would have to use MPS personnel."³⁴¹ Fuller was unhappy with the limitations of the law, and began pushing for an expansion of the charter school legislation.

Despite the union's protestations, in January 1994 the Milwaukee School Board approved a proposal from Fuller to "begin preliminary talks with private education firms and other organizations promoting charter schools."³⁴² The *Milwaukee Journal* reported that while School Board members were "skeptical about allowing private businesses into MPS," the "grim outlook for education financing" pushed them to keep an open mind.³⁴³ The board's decision sparked a debate in Milwaukee; with the MTEA staunchly opposed to charter schools while the community seemed intrigued by their possibility. In one editorial from the *Milwaukee Journal*, the MTEA is accused of the union's top priority being "to win the right of teachers to move to the suburbs" rather than their students' best interest.³⁴⁴ Another cites the "hang-up" of charter schools in the legislature "is by and large the Democrats, who are just too beholden to teacher unions. The Milwaukee union...is leading MPS over the cliff into oblivion. Milwaukee Democrats had best unhitch their wagon from that horse. Instead of pushing reform, MTEA uses it as a bargaining chip... The Democrats must now put children not narrow-minded unions first.

³⁴¹ Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 570.

³⁴² Curtis Lawrence, "Charter School Idea Advances," *Milwaukee Journal*, January 6, 1994.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ "School Charter Law Needs Reform," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 14, 1994.

Otherwise, they may be tagged as the party fighting school innovation.”³⁴⁵ One MTEA teacher, Chuck Howard, responded to these criticisms in an op-ed piece explaining the many problems associated with MPS students and the difficulties in providing quality education to those living in poverty. He argued,

As educators in public schools, we see private charter schools as abandonment, not reform. Turning MPS students over to for-profit companies that can use underpaid, non-licensed, less-qualified teachers for experiments in turning around “failed” schools is not innovative, it is illogical. Blaming a public school faculty for not overcoming all of the social problems facing students is simplistic scapegoating.³⁴⁶

Howard failed to acknowledge that having well-paid, licensed, qualified teachers had not worked for these students, and instead showed an unwillingness to change the status quo.

Howard Fuller was not silent during this debate, telling the *Milwaukee Sentinel* that, “if the board insists he continue to work within the existing system... he may not be the right person for the job.” He explained that, “If I can’t get anything at all that I think is needed to change the system, then why would I be here? Then it would mean that you need another kind of person... who is more oriented to managing what is... I’m not oriented toward managing ‘what is’ because I don’t think ‘what is’ is going to bring about the level of changes that we need for our children.”³⁴⁷ Fuller did not view his position as superintendent of MPS as beholdng him to that system. His job was to provide the best education possible for students attending MPS. Fuller’s experience in the job for two and a half years forced him to face the possibility that the best education may be from outside of the system. In March of 1994, the state legislature would take away this possibility by rejecting his plan to “expand the parameters of the charter schools.”

³⁴⁵ “Milwaukee School Plight Urgent,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 13, 1994.

³⁴⁶ Chuck Howard, “We Need Real Change, Not Rhetoric,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 20, 1994.

³⁴⁷ Dan Parks, “Fuller Dumping MPS Status Quo,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 29, 1994.

Fuller rejected this setback and told reporters he was “not going to accept this,” and that he intended to keep pressing forward with expanding the charter school initiative.³⁴⁸

Charter schools had the power to expand educational options for Milwaukee blacks, and the potential to arm parents with a choice of where to send their children. Charter proponents argued that allowing parents to act as customers in an educational market would increase competition, therefore increasing overall quality. This free-market association has often framed school choice as a “right-wing attack on public education.”³⁴⁹ These partisan politics have had a detrimental effect on school choice. According to Frances C. Fowler, an Educational Leadership professor at Miami University in Ohio, the school choice debate is “easily the most controversial educational policy issue of our time. Its supporters who are mostly, but not entirely, political conservatives—usually advocate school choice as a way to use competition to encourage public schools to improve. Its opponents—who are mostly, but not entirely, political liberals—usually argue against it because they fear that it will increase segregation by race and social class while transforming the public school system into a dumping ground for the students who are the most difficult to educate.”³⁵⁰ The strong correlation between school choice and political affiliation has stifled the ability of choice to be effectively tried as an answer to urban educational problems. With individuals in both the community and the government feeling beholden to partisan commitments, there is less impetus to give choice options a try. These types of commitments explain why Fuller

³⁴⁸ Mario G. Ortiz, “Charter School Setback Angers Fuller,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 27, 1994.

³⁴⁹ Robert Maranto, Myron S. Kayes, and April Gresham Maranto, “Charter Schools and School Reform: What We Know and Where We’ll Go,” in *A Guide to Charter Schools: Research and Practical Advice for Educators*, ed. Myron S. Kayes and Robert Maranto (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006), 3.

³⁵⁰ Frances C. Fowler, “Introduction: The Great School Choice Debate,” *Clearing House* vol. 76, no.1 (September/October 2002): 4.

does not identify with any political party. For him, what is important are the steps being taken to provide education to his people, regardless of which political party are pushing them.

The elections held in November of 1994 for the state legislature tipped the partisan scale in favor of Fuller and the proponents of school choice, “In addition to the governor’s office, Republicans now control both houses of the Legislature... with the state’s largest teacher’s union now in a weaker position Republicans could ease the way for some of Milwaukee Superintendent Howard Fuller’s overdue reforms, such as loosening regressive regulations and permitting real charter schools.”³⁵¹ Black educational activists like Howard Fuller and state assemblywoman Polly Williams used this shift to call on black Milwaukeeans to “take more control of education reform.”³⁵² Despite their differences regarding the building referendum the previous year, Williams and Fuller’s interests converged around the issue of choice. This alliance would help garner support for the choice movement from Milwaukee’s black community for years, an opportunity both activists could not ignore. Around this same time, a report of school costs in metropolitan Milwaukee “found that public schools spend more than twice as much money for each pupil than private schools,” with “higher salaries for teachers and other professionals” accounting for half of that difference.³⁵³ This report, combined with the call for increased black activism created more black community support for Fuller and expanding choice and less sympathy for the MTEA. Fuller looked towards the 1995 school board elections as a chance to gain support for his charter initiative, while

³⁵¹ “Let Them Put Partnership Aside,” *Milwaukee Journal*, November 10, 1994.

³⁵² Curtis Lawrence, “Blacks Urged to Speak Up on Schools: Choice Advocate Calls for Involvement in Reforms,” *Milwaukee Journal*, December 18, 1994.

³⁵³ Jeff Browne, “Private Schools Teach Kids for Half the Cost: Salaries, Staffing, Mandates All Factors in Gap, Report Says,” *Milwaukee Journal*, December 18, 1994.

Governor Thompson used the increased support to put forth a more aggressive plan to expand Milwaukee's voucher program in 1996. Thompson's plan introduced the controversial idea of expanding Milwaukee's voucher program to include religious schools.³⁵⁴

The debate that had been raging about the possibility of expanding school choice in Milwaukee intensified when the proposal made by Thompson made these possibilities a reality. Thompson's willingness to have religious schools among voucher recipients, as well as sites for new charter schools challenged the important separation between church and state. His proposal doubling the number of students that could participate in the existing voucher system also intensified the debate,³⁵⁵ making privatization the battleground for the school board elections in April of 1995. While the MTEA stood firm in their opposition of any privatization, Fuller sought to make his opinion clear before the elections, telling the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "I have never proposed 'privatization' ... We have looked at contracting out facilities and services. The big lie that is being told is that I'm interested in privatizing the [whole] system. It's a big smoke screen."³⁵⁶ After the School Board elections, candidates backed by the teachers union "on an anti-privatization platform" filled four of the five open seats.³⁵⁷ For Fuller, the elections proved he would be working with a school board interested in maintaining the status quo. As Fuller had told the *Milwaukee Journal* months earlier, if that was the goal,

³⁵⁴ "Thompson's Choice Plan Gets Mixed Reactions: Some are Not Sold on Using Public Money to Attend Church Schools," *Milwaukee Journal*, January 16, 1995.

³⁵⁵ "Religious Schools could be Players in Thompson School Experiments," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 19, 1995.

³⁵⁶ Daynel L. Hooker, "MPS Elections May Become Vote on Reform: Group of Candidates Makes For-Profit Schools a Key Campaign Issue," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 2, 1995.

³⁵⁷ Daynel L. Hooker, "Anti-Privatization Candidates Win," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 5, 1995.

he was not the right man for the job. Staying true to his word, in April 1995 Howard Fuller resigned as superintendent of MPS.

Fuller, and MPS, were praised by *Business Week* in April of 1995 as being “among the most aggressive systems over-hauling American urban education,” with Fuller “helping principals and teachers break free of suffocating rules imposed by state and city bureaucrats.”³⁵⁸ The magazine was not alone in its accolades, with educational professors and researchers also praising the innovations Fuller had implemented in the system. In the wake of Fuller’s resignation, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* ran an article summarizing Fuller’s initiatives including: experiments with privatization, school-to-work programs, algebra requirements, curriculum, and accountability.³⁵⁹ In Fuller’s resignation statement, he reinforced his commitment to the students of MPS and cited union desires to keep up the status quo as the reason he could not continue the job:

For all of my adult life in Milwaukee, every fiber of my being has been devoted to helping this community’s children achieve a better future. This will always be the agenda that guides me. It is a tribute to the resiliency and intelligence of the children and parents of Milwaukee that they have done as well as they have in spite of the neglect they have suffered. It is a tribute to the dedication of thousands of splendid individual educators and support staff in the Milwaukee Public Schools that they have done so much for our children, in spite of the self-serving vision of their purported “representatives.” We have heard from these “representatives”—those who protect the forces of the status quo—that Howard Fuller wants to sell out our children to “privatization.” We have heard about my supposedly “secret agenda.” We have heard that I am in the hip pocket of the “downtown business interests.” Indeed these were the scurrilous messages the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association... spread during the recent school Board campaign. These charges reflect the central strategy

³⁵⁸ Richard A. Melcher and Michele Galen, “Milwaukee’s Lesson Plan,” *Business Week*, April 17, 1995.

³⁵⁹ Jack Norman, “District Enjoys National Reputation: Business Week Story Came Even as Speculation About Fuller was Growing,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 19, 1995.

of defenders of the status quo: smear any effort to bring genuine reform to the system as a “plot” to destroy public education.³⁶⁰

His idea that defenders of the status quo would smear efforts to bring reform would influence the next stage of Fuller’s activism. He would set out to dispel what he saw as lies and distortions in the media about school vouchers and other avenues for choice.

Fuller continued his speech, echoing his commitment to the children of the system and exposing those who had their own self-interest in mind,

Let me be blunt. Too often in the last several years, our children have suffered under the yoke of these powerful forces. The events of the last several months have created a more detrimental political environment, which now threatens to reverse the momentum we need to make major change. I now believe I will be maneuvered into a position where I would be expected to become a bureaucrat protecting the status quo, while the public is led to believe that true reform is under way... The district cannot succeed if the primary question, day-after-day, week-after-week, is whether the superintendent can “patch together five votes” to support the many actions that will be necessary to carry out a rigorous reform agenda... Let me emphasize... that for me and for all of us who are totally committed to our children... the words of William Daggett will continue to guide us: *We must love our children’s hopes, dreams, and prayers more than we love the institutional heritage of the school system.*³⁶¹

Fuller choked up and wiped away tears when talking to reporters after his speech, saying, “This is not just a professional matter, it’s a personal matter.”³⁶² Fuller’s exit from the school system allowed him to return to his outsider status. He would use this position as he had in the past, and become a national leader of those interested in reforming education for blacks. In her dissertation discussing the leadership of Howard Fuller,

³⁶⁰ “Resignation Statement Tells of Political Stalemate,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 19, 1995.

³⁶¹ Ibid., emphasis in original.

³⁶² Aland J. Borsuk, “A Difference, ‘But Not Enough,’ Dedicated to Fighting for Change, He Leaves in Frustration,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 19, 1995.

Jeanette Mitchell said that the evening Fuller resigned “resulted in unleashing one of the key leaders in the battle for education reform and choice in the country.”³⁶³

Fuller’s time as superintendent made him more committed to the idea that radical change was necessary to tangibly improve educational opportunities for low-income blacks in Milwaukee. When Mitchell asked Fuller what fueled “this idea, he said that his MPS experience had given him a greater appreciation for how hard it was [to change], but at the same time had given him a greater understanding of how [the bureaucracy] will never work for our children.”³⁶⁴ Fuller’s commitment to those children was his life’s work, and that commitment to his work rather than any particular job was the driving force behind his resignation. Explaining his history of job hopping, Fuller told Mitchell,

People [who care] sometimes don’t understand why I make shifts in my jobs. I stay in a job as long as I am effective. There are many ways to create and “do” your vision. I separate job and work. My work is my purpose. I look for ways to pursue my work, but jobs can be different. Other people see jobs and work as the same. I don’t. There is danger in getting fixed and not being fluid enough to pursue your work in whatever venue.³⁶⁵

Fuller told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (*MJS*) that he wanted to stay in Milwaukee and continue working for education reform, but that, “he wasn’t interested in working for the state, or seeking another urban superintendency.”³⁶⁶ The *MJS* also reported that, “Because he will no longer have to worry about the agenda of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, or answer to a School Board divided in its support of his reform

³⁶³ Jeanette Mitchell, “Fighting the Inequalities in Education for African Americans: A Comparative Analysis of Two Leaders’ Stories” (Ph.D. diss., Cardinal Stritch University, 2001), 157.

³⁶⁴ Mitchell, “Fighting the Inequalities in Education for African Americans,” 163.

³⁶⁵ Fuller, on Mitchell, “Fighting the Inequalities in Education for African Americans,” 163-164.

³⁶⁶ Karen Herzog, “Some See Fuller in Stronger Role,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 23, 1995.

efforts, Fuller may more candidly and aggressively advocate his own ideas for improving the way Milwaukee children are educated.”³⁶⁷ To determine his next step, Fuller “called together a group of supporters from the community and the school system to discuss his departure and weigh the options for his future.”³⁶⁸ According to Mitchell, “This collaborative process produced the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University (The Institute). It was noted that the words ‘change and reform’ were not used in the title nor was ‘schools or schooling.’ Transformation, according to one supporter, was the forming of the mind to embrace material and data, to decipher and decode complex matter, and to do so in a supportive environment. Learning was selected because it was more comprehensive than education.”³⁶⁹ Fuller began holding meetings to discuss the Institute, known as “Explorations.” According to Mitchell, the first meeting “included business people, school administrators, teachers, both public and private, people from higher education, both public and private, parents, young adults, foundation people, suburban people all races, genders, and income levels and even representatives from the teachers’ union.”³⁷⁰

Marquette University hired Fuller to teach and direct the Institute in June of 1995. According to Fuller, the Institute would “Play a role in assuring the success of reforms that are emerging in the state Legislature... Support serious reforms in existing educational institutions, most notably at MPS,” and “Support neighborhood-based efforts that give children the help they need to succeed.”³⁷¹ In the state legislature during this

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Mitchell, “Fighting the Inequalities in Education for African Americans,” 173-174.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 175.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 176.

³⁷¹ Daynel L. Hooker, “Marquette Hires Fuller to Lead School-Reform Institute, Teach,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 30, 1995.

time, Governor Tommy Thompson was pushing for an expansion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. According to Bill Dahlk, along with those who had supported the initial Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, “additional interests began to lay groundwork for an Expanded Choice program after the bill’s passage.”³⁷² Dahlk cites the Milwaukee Archdiocese and members of Milwaukee’s business community as supporters of expanding choice, the former looking to improve their schools’ enrollment and financing and the latter interested in developing a local, competent work force.³⁷³ In July of 1995, Fuller co-wrote a study he hoped would help influence the legislature’s decision on the Expanded Choice bill. Fuller told *MJS* that by writing the report, “he was trying to debunk the notion being advanced by choice detractors that expansion of the program would ultimately hurt low-income and minority children by siphoning money from the public schools they attend.” The *Journal Sentinel* reported that, “Choice critics... fear that legislators will eventually be pressured to strip screening restrictions and income limits from the program, leaving the public schools to fend for themselves with the students who are hardest to educate.” Fuller responded to that notion saying, “That line of thinking prevents you from doing anything... I would argue vociferously against any effort to expand choice beyond the needs of low-income people. Such a strategy would defeat the reason why we fought for choice.”³⁷⁴ Fuller’s report showed that while 21% of Milwaukee parents chose private schools, only 7% of children in the poorest

³⁷² Dahlk, *Against the Wind*, 530.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 530-533.

³⁷⁴ Curtis Lawrence, “Choice Expansion Would Benefit Poor Children, Fuller Argues: He’s Co-Author of Study that Looks at Who Uses Private Schools,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 18, 1995.

neighborhoods used private schools “compared to 30% in the rest of the city and 33% among [children of] public school teachers.”³⁷⁵

The debate waged in Milwaukee was on the leading edge of the national debate on school choice that continues today. Because of the political implications of the issue, however, it is difficult to find an informed opinion that is not directly attempting to support one side or the other. Fowler recognizes that school choice has always been available for those with sufficient means (moving into a better school district, choosing a private school option), while the traditional system locks in those families that are less than well off. For Fowler, the debate centers around, “the nature of human beings and society, the purpose of education, the right of parents to make crucial decisions about the welfare of their children, religious freedom, and the social prerequisites of democracy.”³⁷⁶ These issues range from personal to national contexts, and regards policy that very directly affects people’s life chances, naturally invoking passionate responses. The debate is heated, but according to Fowler, research findings have not helped resolve it: “Rather, sharply different results and arguments between researchers have served to intensify it.”³⁷⁷ Governor Tommy Thompson looked to the Republican legislature to pass the Expanded Choice bill, and “in his State of the State address in January 1995,” discussed his support of choice:

School choice is more than a program... it is a philosophy. It is a belief that parents know best when it comes to their own children... It is a belief that poor parents have the same rights to choose that other parents do... It is the belief that parents will choose the best school for their child. That’s education serving the public. We are expanding our Milwaukee private school choice program to include more children and all private schools. If a mother in Milwaukee wants her child to walk to the private school

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Fowler, 5.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 1.

across the street instead of being bused to public school across town... she is going to have that choice. If that private school across the street has a religious affiliation... she still is going to have that choice. Religious values are not the problem, drop-out rates are.³⁷⁸

While the focus of academic achievement has become central to much of the debate around school choice, the importance of arming parents with a choice and allowing them to choose a schooling environment that best fits their situation cannot be overlooked. These choices not directly resulting in higher achievement, however, has allowed choice critics to devalue the importance of choice itself. According to Urban Education professor Michelle Fine, discussing choice and charter options and their effects on students,

Small . . . will produce a sense of belonging almost immediately, but hugging is not the same as algebra. Rigor and care must be braided together, or we run the risk of creating small, nurturing environments that aren't schools. Keeping kids connected to schools and schooling is critical, but ultimately it's merely a means to a larger end—high standards of student achievement. Ultimately, the first priority of every school must be to stretch students academically to prepare them for the academic rigors of college.³⁷⁹

Fine does not acknowledge the possibility that parents choosing these schools have a greater need for a small, supportive environment to help their children reach their potential, rather than a rigorous educational setting focused on preparing them for college. While the debate on school choice is intense and heated, it must recognize the population whose educational chances it seeks to improve, and broaden its goals beyond preparing students for college.

³⁷⁸ Thompson quoted in John F. Witte, *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 163.

³⁷⁹ Michelle Fine, quoted in Thandeka K Chapman and René Antrop-González, "A Critical Look at Choice Options as Solutions to Milwaukee's Schooling Inequities," *Teachers College Record* vol. 113, no. 4 (April 2011): 806.

State lawmakers voted in Thompson's favor and "agreed to expand the program to 15,000 students and to open eligibility to religious schools."³⁸⁰ Those changes, however, were appealed by the MTEA and the American Civil Liberties Union and were tied up in courts until June of 1998, when the Wisconsin Supreme Court decided 4-2 in favor of the proposal.³⁸¹ Debate over choice, however, was not over, and many people would look exclusively to the academic achievement of choice students as the criterion for whether or not the program was successful. But for reformers and activists like Fuller, the academic performance was not the only indicator of success. Arming parents with the empowerment of choice was an integral part of the expansion of choice. And giving low-income blacks the same choices affluent whites had always had with choice was a way of leveling the playing field in one of the most segregated cities in the country.

Using the Institute for the Transformation of Learning as a base, Fuller set out to expand the conversation about education empowerment for low-income blacks beyond Milwaukee. After successfully advocating for the expansion of choice and providing resources for families seeking choice in Milwaukee, Fuller felt he could have even more influence on the education of low-income blacks if he brought his message around the country. In 2000, Fuller founded the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) to continue his work. When Jeanette Mitchell asked Fuller why he started BAEO, Fuller said,

The specific motivation was as I was being invited to speak around the country at charter school association meetings, at conferences where the issue of choice was being discussed, whether it was charters or vouchers or whatever, what was really interesting to me was that most of those rooms were full of white people, and the discussion was invariably about

³⁸⁰ Daniel Bice and Richard P. Jones, "Choice Ruling Ushers in New Era—Religious Schools Open for Up to 15,000 Pupils," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 11, 1998.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

programs that were going to impact children of color and African American children in particular. So I remember getting up and saying at one of those meetings that there was no way that this battle could be won if the room did not change, if we did not have more African American people and, I believe Hispanic people and other people of color involved in the movement.³⁸²

Fuller again called together a diverse group of individuals to brainstorm ideas, which coalesced at “a meeting in December 1999 in Washington D.C. of African Americans who had attended the first symposium, as well as others who had been ‘recruited’ as they traveled around the country... According to Fuller, this was the founding meeting for BAEO.”³⁸³ A year after their meeting in Washington, the BAEO board scheduled a retreat in Milwaukee. By Mitchell’s account, at the meeting,

Much time was spent detailing the types of options BAEO would support. The discussion led to Fuller’s explanation of the “essence of coalition politics.” The base of the discussion was grounded in the tenuous coalition between BAEO and the “power broker-white conservatives.” Everyone on both sides recognized that the glue for the coalition was Howard Fuller... He [Fuller] explained the ultimate goal of the “white power broker conservatives” was universal vouchers... He pointed out, moving into his passionate mode, having something started out by us (Blacks) to get turned on its head later is not new. He (Fuller) would resist that with all his power, and fight to make sure it never happens. He clearly articulated the line in the sand, “We will not take money and promote a cause that is not ours... We will not have people with money control us when we are not on the same page. I’d rather be poor and fighting for our cause, than support universal vouchers.”³⁸⁴

Critics of Fuller may question how a former Black Panther, seemingly liberal nationalist activist could join forces with an oppressive group he had been fighting against his whole life. One BAEO board member explained this contradiction:

So the average person, who doesn’t deal with educational politics from day to day, they might not really even know about it [Choice]... they feel like the Republican party and its conservative right-wing agenda is in

³⁸² Fuller quoted in Mitchell, “Fighting the Inequalities in Education for African Americans,” 217.

³⁸³ Mitchell, “Fighting the Inequalities in Education for African Americans,” 220.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 232-233.

control of this movement, and they're afraid to invest their energies into that because... we've placed ourselves as fighting against that. So how do you join somebody who you've been fighting against your entire life?... that's a real question that we've got to answer... So that's why I think BAEO becoming [sic] a force that educates parents, that educates families and educates policy-makers, it gives us an opportunity to combat that perception.³⁸⁵

Another board member defended the alliance saying, "We're not going to keep any permanent partners, like Howard says, in this fight. We are going to just have common issues. But if the white conservative agenda is going to benefit our kids for even a passing moment of opportunity, we have an obligation as black educational advocates to get as many of our kids through that window of opportunity before it closes."³⁸⁶ Fuller used the creation of both the Institute for the Transformation of Learning and the Black Alliance for Educational Options to continue his work of providing access to quality education for low-income blacks. Another way he continued this fight was with his writings. Fuller used his position at Marquette, his reputation as a community activist, and his newfound respect as former superintendent to voice his opinion publicly about choice. Writing primarily to break down what he saw as "lies and distortions" about school choice programs put forth by powerful teachers union lobbies, Fuller vociferously defends choice programs as effectively empowering low-income families and improving educational opportunities for their children.

The issue of choice, like other school reform movements, is much more complicated and diverse than typical debates, scholarship, or media representations expose. In the 21st century, "politics around school issues is looking more and more like politics around other domestic policy issues such as housing, welfare, social services, and

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 245.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 244-245.

community development. The changes that seem dramatic within the local education sphere in most respects are old hat in American politics more generally, including at the local level.”³⁸⁷ A view that has been typically heralded by conservatives is that public education has long acted “more as a piggy-bank for jobs and other forms of patronage than as an engine for serious investment in human capital and for closing achievement gaps.”³⁸⁸ Regardless of political affiliation, increasing frustration with underachieving schools (high drop-out rates, low GPAs, low test scores, etc.) has created support for the choice movement from both sides. While both Democrats and Republicans have supported charter schools, voucher programs tend to be more controversial and seen as a more radical market approach to education: “charter politics are galvanized by different motives and policy frames that create strange political coalitions. Charter schools could easily be called the ‘all things to all people’ reform.”³⁸⁹ Because the politics surrounding the issue are so tense, especially because of the possible implication expanding choice has on the power of teachers’ unions, it is difficult to read reports about choice that go unchallenged. And although many states have started charter programs, many people still are not even sure what charter schools are. For Fuller, what was important about the issue was spreading information about it. He sought to provide accurate information to families seeking choice, and empower them simply by providing that choice. As was his approach in the Department of Employment Relations, as the head of the Department of Health and Human Services, and as superintendent, Fuller wanted to be honest about choice issues,

³⁸⁷ Jeffrey R. Henig, “The Politics of Localism in an Era of Centralization, Privatization, and Choice,” *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* 108, no. 1 (April 2009): 126.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁸⁹ Michael W. Kirst, “Politics of Charter Schools: Competing National Advocacy Coalitions Meet Local Politics,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 82, no. 2-3 (2007): 186-187.

because he believed “no matter what it is, you have to tell the truth... You have to get people to face up to what is the reality in order to make a change.”³⁹⁰

In 1999, a year after the Expanded Choice bill was deemed constitutional by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, Fuller began publishing information about Milwaukee and its choice program to dispel criticisms and uncover the “lies and distortions”³⁹¹ he believed were being accepted by the media and subsequently, the public. In March of 1999, Fuller partnered with MPS educational researcher George Mitchell and wrote “The Fiscal Impact of School Choice and the Milwaukee Public Schools” in response to “predictions that it would have a severe and unfair fiscal impact on the Milwaukee Public Schools.”³⁹² Fuller and Mitchell used budgetary information from MPS to examine “changes in state aid to MPS and in overall MPS spending,” and found that in the nine years that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was in effect, “real state aid per pupil” had increased by 43 percent.³⁹³ The authors also disputed a claim made by the Institute for Wisconsin’s Future that MPS “would experience a net [state aid] loss of \$22.2 million in 1998-1999,” instead arguing that “when adjusted for inflation, state aid to MPS grew 1.4%.”³⁹⁴ Educational researcher Frederick M. Hess discussing the debate of this fiscal impact said, “Regardless of the relative merits of these claims, the salient point... is the reluctance of voucher proponents to forcefully argue that the MPS *ought* to be financially

³⁹⁰ Howard Fuller, interview by Jack Dougherty (transcript), 12/28/1995, in *More Than One Struggle Oral History Project Records 1995*, Manuscript Collection 217, Box 1, Folder 17, Golda Meir Library Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 27.

³⁹¹ Howard L. Fuller, “The Saturation Campaign of Lies and Distortions About Educational Vouchers,” Paper presented at the Second Annual Meeting of Educational Options for African Americans, (Milwaukee, WI, March 2-5, 2000).

³⁹² Howard L. Fuller and George A. Mitchell, “The Fiscal Impact of School Choice on the Milwaukee Public Schools,” *Current Education Issues*, no. 99-2 (March 1999): 2.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

penalized for losing students.”³⁹⁵ As Fuller and Mitchell did not make this argument, but instead showed just the information about the MPCP’s impact, they demonstrated that Fuller was interested first and foremost with getting accurate, honest information about choice to the public, information he hoped would garner support for choice.

In December 1999, Fuller and Mitchell looked to dispel more negative choice criticisms in “The Impact of School Choice on Racial and Ethnic Enrollment in Milwaukee Private Schools.”³⁹⁶ In this article, the authors cited the NAACP as arguing “a natural and foreseeable consequence [of the expanded choice program] will be... further segregation of the schools [in Milwaukee].”³⁹⁷ Fuller and Mitchell argued that rather than increasing isolation, choice caused a “**notable increase in racial balance in Milwaukee private schools**” because “most low-income students using school vouchers... belong to racial or ethnic minorities. In using the choice program, they have moved from racially isolated public schools with a low percentage of white students, to systems of private schools with a larger enrollment of white students. This has led to more integrated private school systems.”³⁹⁸ While Fuller had made it clear throughout his years of activism in Milwaukee that integration was not important to him, it was still a key issue for other reform activists, making it important to dispel the argument that choice had increased segregation. Comparing Minority and White enrollment by percentages in public schools from before the Expanded Choice bill and after, the authors successfully showed that schools were becoming less racially isolated as a result of choice. The following tables

³⁹⁵ Frederick M. Hess, *Revolution at the Margins: The Impact of Competition on Urban School Systems* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), 125-126, emphasis in original.

³⁹⁶ Howard L. Fuller and George A. Mitchell, “The Impact of School Choice on Racial and Ethnic Enrollment in Milwaukee Private Schools,” *Current Education Issues* no. 99-5 December (1999).

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, emphasis in original.

were provided, including actual White and Minority enrollment before and after choice expansions, and the estimated percentages (estimated using previous demographic trends) without those expansions:

Minority and White Enrollment, By %, Private Schools, 1998-99 v. 1994-95.³⁹⁹

	Minority	White
1994-95 (actual, before expansion)	27.4% (n = 7,631)	72.6% (n = 20,185)
1998-99 (actual, with choice expansion)	35.7% (n = 9,718)	64.3% (n = 17,490)
1998-99 (estimated, without expansion)	26.9% (n = 5,858)	73.1% (n = 15, 958)

Minority and White Enrollment, By %, Public Schools, 1998-99 v. 1994-95.⁴⁰⁰

	Minority	White
1994-95 (actual, before expansion)	77.6% (n = 82,916)	22.4% (n = 23, 951)
1998-99 (actual, with choice expansion)	81.5% (n = 91,468)	18.5% (n = 20,700)
1998-99 (estimated, without expansion)	81.1% (n = 95, 328)	18.9% (n = 22, 232)

Fuller and Mitchell put out a similar report again after the following school year, which reinforced their claims. They also acknowledged that, “The purpose of this report... is neither to elevate nor diminish the importance of integration. Rather, its sole purpose is to respond factually to claims by voucher opponents that school choice increases segregation.”⁴⁰¹ The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* responded to the report, declaring that, “a year after the expansion of choice to religious schools, the racial tally is in. And—

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁰¹ Howard L. Fuller and George A. Mitchell, “The Impact of School Choice on Integration on Milwaukee Private Schools,” *Current Education Issues* 2000-02 (June 2000): 3.

drumroll please—the critics are wrong. The program has enhanced diversity among the city’s students.”⁴⁰²

Fuller’s frustrations with MPCP critics came together in a paper he co-wrote for the Second Annual Symposium on Educational Options for African Americans with the Black Alliance for Educational Options on March 2-5, 2000. Fuller and Kaleem Claire, another BAEO member, discussed “four common examples of Big Lies are that **existing** voucher programs,”

- Use selective admission practices to “cream” the “best” students.
- Do not serve students with special learning needs.
- Will “destroy” public education.
- Do not improve the academic achievement of voucher students.⁴⁰³

Fuller and Mitchell wrote an article in January of 2000 disputing the first two “big lies” he identified for the Symposium. The authors disputed the first claim with the fact that, “*state law prohibits private schools from using any criteria for MPCP-eligible students.*”⁴⁰⁴ The authors disputed the second claim by explaining the process parents of special needs students go through in MPS:

MPS’ school directory says, “When children with special needs select a school/program where their individual needs cannot be appropriately met [i.e., an “Inappropriate School Choice”], parents will be contacted by special education supervisors to discuss options at other schools...” MPS has the final say, not the parent, in determining where a special needs student attends school, including whether the student may attend a school that does not have a program for them. This is not so with MPCP schools, which, as with MPS schools, do not have programs for all special needs students. While an MPCP school may advise a parent that the school does

⁴⁰² Stanford, “Diversity Flourishing in Choice Schools,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, December 2, 1999.

⁴⁰³ Howard Fuller and Kaleem Claire, “*Lies and Distortions: The Campaign Against School Vouchers*,” Marquette University, Institute for the Transformation of Learning, Office of Research, April 2001, Milwaukee, WI, 6, emphasis in original.

⁴⁰⁴ Howard L. Fuller and George A. Mitchell, “Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” *Current Education Issues 2000-01* January (2000): 4, emphasis in original.

not have a specific program, under state law the decision to attend the school is the parent's, not the school's.⁴⁰⁵

The third “big lie” the Fuller and Claire identified was that voucher programs would destroy public education. They introduced an opinion of public education that challenged the status quo: “it is our belief that public education is a concept and that government-owned and government-operated schools represent but one way of delivering public education. As shown at the postsecondary level, there are many ways to provide public education beyond high school. The same is so in grades K-12, where society is choosing an increasing variety of ways to organize schools that deliver ‘public education.’”⁴⁰⁶ Fuller and Claire cited research that MPS had responded to the new competition by trying to reshape their programs and become more appealing to parents. The Superintendent of MPS, Spence Korte, was interviewed in January of 2001 on Wisconsin Public Television and agreed that MPS was trying to be more competitive, “Like many other monopolistic operations, you get a little bit complacent when you’re the only game in town... We are dedicating ourselves to make sure that public schools know how to reach out and know how to serve families and we’re the local place for people to start for their educational programs. We hope they’ll give us a good look.”⁴⁰⁷ For Fuller, who had always pushed the need for more accountability in public schools, this was a clear victory. Anything that made MPS strive to be better should have a positive impact on the students it had traditionally underserved.

The final “lie” Fuller and Claire challenged was the criticism that voucher programs did not improve the academic achievement of voucher students. While not

⁴⁰⁵ Howard L. Fuller and George A. Mitchell, “Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 11.

⁴⁰⁶ Fuller and Claire, “Lies and Distortions: The Campaign Against School Vouchers,” 12.

⁴⁰⁷ Fuller and Claire, “Lies and Distortions: The Campaign Against School Vouchers,” 13.

taking into account the empowerment students and parents feel by having more choice in their educational options, voucher opponents have argued that choice programs do not raise student achievement. Fuller and Claire explored the validity of this claim rather than arguing the importance the empowerment of choice provides. According to the authors, in 1999 the National Educators Association claimed, “There is no evidence that vouchers improve student learning. Every serious study of voucher plans concludes that vouchers don’t improve student achievement.”⁴⁰⁸ Citing research done by Harvard education researchers, Fuller and Claire presented the findings that,

Researchers who have served as evaluators of the publicly-funded choice programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland as well as the privately-funded programs in Washington, D.C., Dayton, New York, and San Antonio agree that these programs have been generally positive developments and have supported their continuation if not expansion. If one only examined the competing interest group and research community spin on the various evaluations instead of reading the evaluations themselves one might easily miss the level of positive consensus that exists. This positive consensus is all the more remarkable given the politically contentious nature of the issue and the rewards scholars have for highlighting disagreements with one another. [Yet] there is largely agreement among the researchers who have collected and analyzed the flood of new data on school choice that these programs are generally positive in their effects and ought to be continued if not expanded.⁴⁰⁹

Fuller and Claire presented information directly related to four distortions they had found in the media regarding school choice. The authors made it clear that their priority was providing the information that countered those claims, and then used that information to advocate for choice. Fuller’s commitment to uplifting his race is clear in his commitment to providing them information, and trusting them to make their own decisions.

⁴⁰⁸ Howard L. Fuller, “The Saturation Campaign of Lies and Distortions About Educational Vouchers,” 13.

⁴⁰⁹ Fuller and Claire, “Lies and Distortions: The Campaign Against School Vouchers,” 22.

Howard Fuller has been an influential voice for choice politics on a national level. As of 2004, Fuller had started chapters of the Black Alliance of Educational Options (BAEO) “in 20 states and the District of Columbia.”⁴¹⁰ Choice programs in Milwaukee, which were implemented and supported by Fuller, have helped lay the foundation for similar programs in Ohio, Florida, Texas, and New York.⁴¹¹ Fuller’s actions as MPS superintendent gave him national attention as a pioneer willing to take risks to create reform in failing school systems. As a result, George W. Bush asked Fuller to serve as an advisor during his first presidential campaign.⁴¹² The *National Journal* reported that when governor, Bush requested a meeting with Fuller when he was speaking in Austin, Texas on behalf of BAEO in 1999. During the meeting,

They discussed vouchers and charter schools (public schools with few regulations imposed from above) and the importance of supporting people working to change public education. Fuller, who was instrumental in implementing Milwaukee’s voucher program when he took the superintendent’s job in 1991, is a strong advocate of vouchers for children from low-income families. The Milwaukee program now gives these children \$4,400 apiece in taxpayer dollars to attend private schools, including religious ones. But Fuller said his top goal is trying to make sure kids learn, and Bush convinced Fuller that was his goal, too. “This is not a line that should divide liberals and conservatives,” Fuller said.⁴¹³

As a result of this meeting, Fuller became one of thirteen special education advisors for George W. Bush. During his first term in the Oval Office, Bush implemented the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB), which “creates pressure on districts (and states) to

⁴¹⁰ Lisa M. Stulberg, “What History Offers Progressive Choice Scholarship,” in *The Emancipatory Promise of Charter Schools: Toward a Progressive Politics of School Choice*, ed. Eric Rofes and Lisa M. Stulberg (New York: State of New York Press, 2004), 32.

⁴¹¹ See Jay P. Greene, Paul E. Peterson, and Jiangtao Du, “Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment,” *Education and Urban Society* vol. 31 no.2, February 1999 190-213, and Frederick M. Hess, *Revolution at the Margins: The Impact of Competition on Urban School Systems* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 2002).

⁴¹² Barbara Miner, “Seed Money for Conservatives,” *Rethinking Schools*, Summer 2004.

⁴¹³ Clipping, Siobhan Gorman, “Bush’s Lesson Plan,” *National Journal*, August 7, 1999, in Howard Fuller News Clippings, Raynor Memorial Library Archives, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

provide much tighter oversight of individual school performance—and to deploy charter schools as an option for youngsters otherwise mired in low-performing district-operated schools.”⁴¹⁴ Being such an influential voice for the country’s first voucher program provided opportunities for Fuller to influence voucher and choice expansion from coast to coast. His activism after his time as superintendent thrust him into the national spotlight as an advocate for choice, broadening his influential role as a champion for low-income blacks everywhere.

⁴¹⁴ Chester E. Finn Jr. and Paul T. Hill, “School Choice in Milwaukee Fifteen Years Later,” in *Charter Schools Against the Odds*, ed. Paul T. Hill (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 2006), 125.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

After his time as superintendent, Fuller used his outsider status to get information out about and advocate for school choice programs. Through the Institute for the Transformation of Learning and the Black Alliance for Educational Options, Fuller challenged powerful bureaucracies he saw putting their self-interest over their responsibility to Milwaukee's underserved children. Fuller and Milwaukee education researcher George Mitchell came together again in 2006 to write an article where they "concluded that collective bargaining is taking public education in an unsustainable direction,"⁴¹⁵ and argued, "The monopoly status of public education has insulated it from the difficult adjustments occurring in most other sectors of the economy, including many sectors that rely on unionized labor."⁴¹⁶ Fuller and Mitchell also declared, "Eventually, in our view, there will be insufficient public support and capacity for continuing a system that uses more and more resources without commensurate results."⁴¹⁷

It seems that day has come. While the public's frustration with the powerful teachers' union in Wisconsin came to a head in Spring 2011, the public and governor were not shy in airing their grievances with a powerful bureaucracy that refused compromise. While the language around collective bargaining rights focused on teachers and what they deserved, the discussion of the students they were hired to serve was secondary. This is what Howard Fuller has been fighting against his whole life. His desire to make these children a focus by providing them access to quality educational

⁴¹⁵ Howard Fuller and George A. Mitchell, "A Culture of Complaint," *Education Next*, Summer 2006, 18.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*

opportunities has guided nearly every professional decision he has made throughout his life. His ability to navigate different worlds and power structures has led him to a spectrum of positions allowing him to advance his race. Refusing to stay at a job once he has become ineffective, Fuller is not satisfied unless he is truly working to uplift and liberate his people, the work and purpose of a race man.

Howard Fuller has continuously demonstrated that he will work with anyone who shares his goal of uplifting black children by providing them access to quality education. This is clear through numerous instances where interest convergence has brought Fuller together with unlikely allies. The Milwaukee Archdiocese saw choice as an opportunity to counter declining enrollment rates in Milwaukee's parochial schools. Milwaukee's business community, concerned about the lack of a local, competent workforce, also saw choice as an opportunity to address their problem. Finally, white conservatives supported choice with an eventual goal of providing universal vouchers in Milwaukee and its surrounding suburbs. Howard Fuller used all of these instances to push his choice agenda, using windows of opportunity provided by these groups to improve educational opportunities for low-income blacks. Educational researcher T.C. Pedroni notes that these periods of interest convergence suggest "that this coalition of 'strange bedfellows' must compel progressive educational scholars and activists alike to rethink their current stance on claiming that these progressive Black voucher advocates are merely passive pawns of White conservative forces."⁴¹⁸ Fuller has done an incredible job of using interest convergence to advance his goals, without allowing those he has converged with to supersede his cause. He also has kept no permanent partners. This became clear in

⁴¹⁸ T.C. Pedroni, quoted in Thandeka K Chapman and René Antrop-González, "A Critical Look at Choice Options as Solutions to Milwaukee's Schooling Inequities," *Teachers College Record* vol. 113, no. 4 (April 2011): 797.

Spring 2011 when Wisconsin governor Scott Walker sought to “eliminate income limits in Milwaukee’s school choice program, allowing the children of middle-income and wealthy people to attend private schools at taxpayer expense.”⁴¹⁹ Fuller, who had vehemently fought for school choice with those who were now seeking to remove the income limit, stood strong in his stance and echoed previous statements saying, “I do not support universal vouchers wherever they put it...I still believe the focus of these programs should be on low-income and working-class people.”⁴²⁰ When Fuller testified in front of the State Assembly about the proposed change, he referred to it as “egregious” and “outrageous.” He also told reporters after he testified that, “This is where I get off the train.”⁴²¹ While the choice coalition of Fuller and white power brokers in Milwaukee is diverging, Fuller’s response to this change and his unwillingness to budge should not come as a surprise. In examining Fuller’s life, he has repeatedly worked a job, or fought a fight until it was no longer effective. Fuller told Jeanette Mitchell in September of 2001 that, “I don’t think organizations are to necessarily last. It depends on whether or not they’re still serving a function.”⁴²² This idea, and its extension to not only organizations, but philosophies and allies is the most important thing we can learn from Howard Fuller.

Fuller has demonstrated his commitment to the education of low-income blacks through his pragmatic view of racial integration. While Fuller has demonstrated integrating schools is secondary in his activism to providing quality education, he has conjoined these opportunities when necessary. While some parents value an integrated

⁴¹⁹ Patrick Marley and Jason Stein, “Walker: Widen School Choice: Green Bay, Racine, Beloit Would be Included, Governor Says in D.C. Talk,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 11, 2011.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Tom Tolan, “Howard Fuller Calls Choice Plans ‘Egregious’ and ‘Outrageous,’” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 11, 2011.

⁴²² Mitchell, 147.

learning environment for their children, Education professors Chapman and Antrop-González argue, “White people are willing to live and learn with a small percentage of people of color or poor people, as shown by the success of the Chapter 220 program, which allows small numbers of students of color to enter suburban schools; however, there is a limit to the percentage they see as valued and not detrimental.” Chapman and Antrop-González also argue that situations where choice pushes that threshold may be a factor in subsequent white (and middle-class black) flight.⁴²³ In Durham, Fuller gained the understanding that the mere mixing of bodies in schools did not make meaningful, integrated learning environments. For him, choice is supposed to cater to those low-income black students regardless of who is then willing to attend school with them. Through his approaches to integration, Fuller reinforces that no cause will ever supersede his own goal, regardless of how this goal affects the appeal of choice schools to others.

Fuller’s ability to evolve his thinking and subsequently, his actions has made him a community activist and leader who effectively gets things done. Whether you agree with his ideas or not, Fuller’s ability to navigate different situations and make the most of any window of opportunity available to him in order to achieve his goals has made him effective, powerful, and influential. His unwillingness to be beholden to his previous philosophies and former battles opens up possibilities for reform and change other activists and leaders deny themselves. It is the belief of this author that if a better alternative was offered to provide quality educational opportunities to low-income blacks than school choice, Howard Fuller would support it. Regardless of his status as a national

⁴²³ Thandeka K Chapman and René Antrop-González, “A Critical Look at Choice Options as Solutions to Milwaukee’s Schooling Inequities,” *Teachers College Record* vol. 113, no. 4 (April 2011): 803.

advocate for choice, regardless of his own position as board chair of a Milwaukee charter school; if he saw a better way, he would work for it. If this new way forced him to ally with Michael McGee, Polly Williams, or Scott Walker, he would fight for it. If more people with the same kind of influence as Fuller had that conviction, allowing them to focus on their goals rather than who is behind them, reforms in urban education are only the tip of the iceberg for the positive changes that could occur.

In early 2012 Howard Fuller resumed his chairmanship of the Black Alliance for Educational Options while teaching at Marquette University and directing the Institution for the Transformation of Learning. According to the National BAEO website, Fuller is also currently,

Chair of the Board of the Wisconsin Municipalities Private School Finance Commission, the Alliance for Choices in Education in Milwaukee, and CEO Leadership Academy. He also serves on the Board of Directors of Transcenter for Youth, the Johnson Foundation, the Big Picture Company, the Joyce Foundation, School Choice Wisconsin, Advocates for School Choice, the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, The Charter School Review Committee for the City of Milwaukee, and the Wisconsin United for Health Foundation.⁴²⁴

At 71 years old, it is clear Howard Fuller is not slowing down. His resolve to continue fighting to provide opportunities for low-income blacks is clear in the current BAEO mission, “to increase access to high-quality educational options for Black children by actively supporting parental choice policies and programs that empower low-income and working-class Black families.”⁴²⁵ School choice has been expanding throughout the country with the help of Howard Fuller and BAEO, and will continue to be an important part of educational policy in the coming years. Recent activity in Wisconsin, along with

⁴²⁴ Black Alliance for Educational Options, “Board of Directors, Howard Fuller biography,” <http://www.baeo.org/board.html>.

⁴²⁵ Black Alliance for Educational Options, “Mission Statement,” <http://www.baeo.org/mission.html>.

an upcoming 2012 presidential election, has forced a conversation about school choice and accountability invoking passionate responses from both sides of the aisle. Based on his life and activism, it is likely Howard Fuller will be engaged in these battles.

What it means to be a race man, or the importance of such a figure seems to be changing over time. Dwight A. McBride discussed this in his essay, "Toward the New Black Studies: Or Beyond the Old Race Man," arguing, "We are ready to move beyond the centrality of the lone 'race man' standing at the precipice between a monolithic Blackness and the rest of the world broadcasting a prêt-a-porter version of Black life."⁴²⁶ Calling for the stories of black life in the United States to be complicated, McBride challenged the strength of the concept of the race man. While the definition may be challenged or shift over time, Fuller's life shows it is not time to simply move beyond the idea of the race man. His dedication to providing access to educational opportunities to low-income blacks, and the personal sacrifices he has made to do so, reinforces the power a race man can hold and the changes they can bring. In the spirit of its original meaning; Howard Fuller is a man "intent on 'advancing the race' by working as a role model, both to uplift the ghetto community and to disabuse the wider society of its often negative view of blacks."⁴²⁷ From Milwaukee, to Waukesha, to Cleveland, to Durham, to Mozambique, and back again, this has been Howard Fuller's life's work. As the work, not the job which facilitates that work, has always been most important, at 71 years old it seems clear that Howard Fuller has not, and will not ever stop working for the increased opportunities and decreased discrimination of low-income blacks across the country.

⁴²⁶ Dwight A. McBride, "Towards the New Black Studies: Or Beyond the Old Race Man," *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007): 437-438.

⁴²⁷ Elijah Anderson, "The Precarious Balance: Race Man or Sellout?" in *The Darden Dilemma*, ed. Ellis Cose (Harper Collins Publishing: New York, 1997), 116.

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